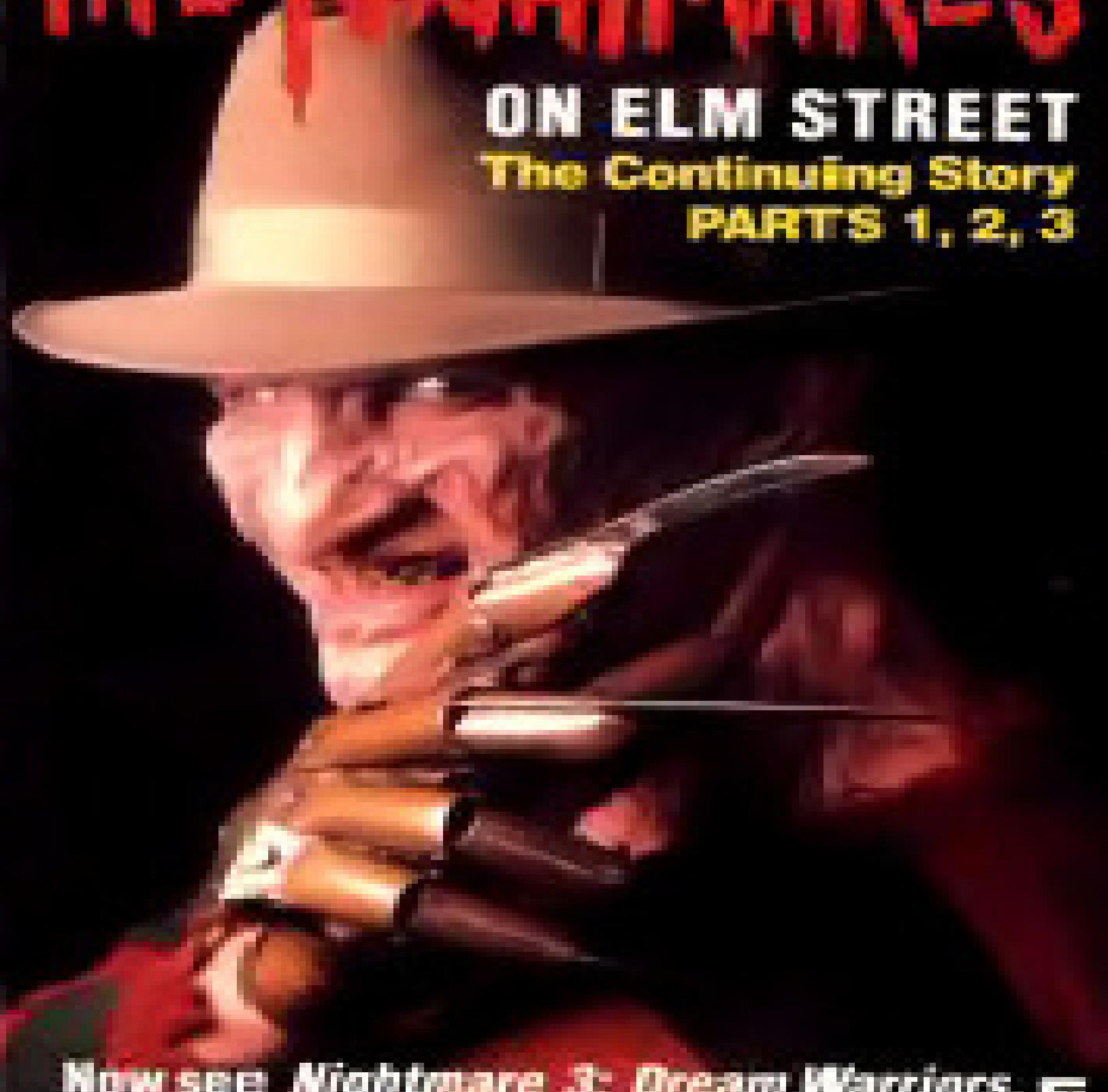


THE NIGHTMARES

ON ELM STREET

The Continuing Story

PARTS 1, 2, 3



Now see *Nightmare 3: Dream Warriors*, a major motion picture

Directed by Jonathan Demme, Produced by Christopher Cain, Written by William Goldman
Starring Christopher Walken, Dennis Christopher and Robert Englund, plus Robert Duvall

STX

A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET: PART I

Prologue

Freddy was dead.

The good people of Elm Street had seen to it that the Springwood Slasher would never bother anyone ever again.

Ten years had come and gone since then, and only now were the good people of Elm Street beginning to sleep peacefully at night, safe and warm in their cozy suburban bedrooms.

Freddy was dead and gone.

But the nightmare was just about to begin...

Chapter 1

Tina woke up screaming, the covers clutched tightly in her trembling hands.

"You all right?" asked her mother from the doorway.

"Sure, Ma," whispered Tina. "It was just a bad dream."

Just a bad dream, she repeated to herself, trying very hard to believe her own words. Tina had not lived fifteen years without suffering an occasional bad dream, but this dream was not like anything she had ever known before.

There was something evil about this dream.

It had started innocently enough. Tina was lost in a vast room full of thick leaky pipes and pounding machinery. It was a boiler room, similar to the one at school—only it was unbelievably large, and Tina was wearing the same thin nightgown she had gone to sleep in. Despite the steam that pervaded the stifling air, she had felt chilled to the bone as she wandered aimlessly through iron doorways and along ramps and down metal ladders that seemed always to lead nowhere.

And she remembered animal noises. A lamb had bleated, and Tina's heart had begun to pound furiously in her chest. What a lamb was doing in the boiler room in the first place and why its bleating should be so terrifying were questions Tina couldn't have answered if her life had depended on it.

And why did she feel that it might?

Then there was the fabric, a dirty piece of cloth hanging in the middle of nowhere. And suddenly it tore open with a terrible ripping noise as four gleaming blades like steel fingers glittered threateningly in the murky darkness. Tina began to run, but she was thoroughly lost and didn't know which way to go. There was a horrible screeching sound as the steel blades scraped against the iron pipes like fingernails on a chalkboard or the high-pitched whine of a dentist's drill as it digs painfully into an exposed nerve. And Tina kept running, knowing that her life depended on escape, but knowing too that ultimately there could be no escape.

And then she stopped to catch her breath and wipe away the sweat that streamed down her face in hot rivulets, and for one sweet moment Tina felt safe. Perhaps, she thought, just perhaps, there might be a way out after all.

And that was when the man with the razor-blade fingers loomed up behind her, clawing at her nightgown with insane fury as he enfolded her in his deadly arms.

It was Tina's scream that had awoken her and summoned her mother to the bedroom.

"You sure you're all right?" her mother asked again, still leaning up against the doorjamb.

"It was just a dream," repeated Tina.

"It must have been some dream." Mrs. Gray shook her head slowly from side to side as she gazed at her daughter's nightgown.

Tina looked down, suddenly aware of the four long slashes up the middle of her favorite nightgown.

"You better cut your fingernails or stop that kind of dreaming," said her mother. "One or the other." She looked at her daughter one more time and then quietly shut the door behind her.

Instinctively, Tina reached back and removed the crucifix that hung on her bedroom wall. She clutched it to her heart as the old jump-rope song she had sung as a child seemed to chant itself in her brain.

*One, two, Freddie's coming for you.
Three, four, better lock your door.
Five, six, grab your crucifix.
Seven, eight, gonna stay up late.
Nine, ten, never sleep again.*

"That's what it reminded me of," Tina told her best friend, Nancy Thompson, the next morning. "That old jump-rope song. Worst nightmare I ever had."

The girls had just stepped out of Glen Lantz's old red convertible. Glen had already taken Nancy's books as the three young people

strode briskly toward the old high school building.

"As a matter of fact," said Nancy, "I had a bad dream last night myself."

Tina was about to ask Nancy about her dream when Rod Lane trotted up from behind and draped his right arm over her shoulders.

"I had a hard-on this morning when I woke up, Tina," he said. "Had your name written all over it."

Tina looked at the boy and shrugged off his arm.

"There's four letters in my name, Rod," she said. "How could there be room on your joint for four letters?"

Nancy and Glen laughed out loud. Despite Tina's flip attitude toward the boy, Nancy knew that her friend really liked him. There always seemed to be an almost tangible sexual tension in the air whenever Tina and Rod were together, and the fact that Tina's mother couldn't stand the boy only added to his appeal. Rod had never looked like the rest of them, in his heavy boots and his black leather jacket, and he had a vulgar way of expressing himself that Nancy sometimes found a little embarrassing. Still, she knew that he was basically a good person, and she was confident that someday Tina Gray would be known as the girl who finally tamed the infamous Rod Lane.

Rod, on the other hand, would never be known for the brilliance of his repartee.

"Hey!" he yelled as Tina, Nancy, and Glen strode off without him. "Up yours with a twirling lawn mower!"

"Rod says the sweetest things," said Tina as the boy took off across the lawn.

"He's nuts about you," said Nancy, smiling at her friend.

"Yeah, nuts. Anyway, I'm too tired to worry about it. I couldn't get back to sleep at all last night." Tina paused and looked at Nancy. "So what did you dream?"

"Forget it," said Nancy. She felt herself shudder as she recalled the nightmare that had kept her up most of the night. "The point is, everybody has nightmares once in a while. It's no biggie."

"The next time you have one," suggested Glen, "just tell yourself that's all it is, right while you're having it. Once you do that, you wake

up right away." He looked at Nancy and shrugged. "At least it works for me."

They had just reached the steps in front of Springwood High when the first bell began to ring. Glen quickly kissed Nancy on the cheek and dashed off to his first class.

"Hey!" yelled Tina as the boy took off, climbing two steps at a time. "Did you have a nightmare too?" But Glen was gone.

Tina turned back to Nancy and sighed deeply.

"Maybe we're going to have an earthquake or something. They say things get really weird before an earthquake."

But there was no earthquake, and Tina was still thinking about her dream when she got home from school that afternoon. It didn't make her feel any better to learn that her mother was going to be spending the next couple of nights out of town with her current boyfriend. The first thing Tina did was invite Nancy Thompson to spend the night at her house. Neither girl objected when Glen decided to tag along.

"I'm glad you could stay over," said Tina when her friends arrived. "When my mom said she was taking off for two days, I almost died!"

"No problem," said Nancy, giving her friend's arm a reassuring squeeze. "Nancy and Glen to the rescue."

The girls settled themselves on the couch, and Glen announced that he had to call home.

"I can't believe his mother is letting him stay over here," said Tina.

"Well," said Nancy with a mischievous smile, "she isn't exactly."

The girls watched as Glen inserted a cassette into the oversize tape player he had placed on the table next to the telephone.

"I've got this cousin who lives near the airport," he explained while he waited for his mother to pick up the phone. "So I borrowed this sound-effects tape... Hello, Mom?" He pushed a button on the tape player and the sound of a 747 coming in for a landing suddenly filled the room. "Yeah, I'm out at Barry's," he said. He grinned at the girls, and Nancy put a hand over Tina's mouth to stop her from laughing. "Yeah, noisy as usual. Glad we don't live here What? Oh, Aunt Eunice says hello."

The roar of the jet was overwhelming now, as if Glen were standing in the middle of the runway.

"I'll call you in the morning!" he shouted, his lips pressed against the mouthpiece. "Don't worry, I—"

Suddenly the tape was silent. Then a new roaring began, but this time it was the roar of stock cars screeching at top speed around a racetrack.

"I'm not sure," said Glen into the telephone, struggling to improvise. "I think some kids are drag-racing outside."

Then the sound effects changed again. There was a screech of brakes, a blood-curdling scream, and the sound of a horrible collision. Nancy jumped up from the couch and tried to turn off the tape recorder, but her fingers found the fast-forward instead.

"I got to go, Mom," said Glen, glaring at Tina as she dissolved into laughter on the couch. "I think there's been an accident out front."

Meanwhile, Nancy had managed to turn the machine back on. But now they were in the middle of a full-scale war, complete with chattering machine guns and exploding bombs.

"Right!" shouted Glen. "I'll call the police. No, just some neighbors having a fight, I guess. I'm fine, Mom! I'll call you in the morning."

At last, Nancy found the stop button and the room was filled with blessed silence.

"Worked like a charm," said Nancy as she and Tina exploded with laughter.

An hour later, Tina, Nancy, and Glen were relaxing in front of a cozy fire and listening to soft music on the stereo.

"Maybe we should call Rod and ask him over," said Nancy as she snuggled up next to Glen on the couch.

"Rod and I are through," said Tina. She sat back and propped her feet up on the coffee table. "He's too much of a maniac."

"He should join the Marines," said Glen. "Maybe they could make something out of him. Like a hand grenade."

Tina laughed.

"See?" said Nancy "You're forgetting the bad dream already. Didn't I tell you?"

Tina shook her head sadly, the smile gone from her face.

"All day long I've been seeing that guy's weird face," she said. "And I keep hearing those fingernails—"

"Fingernails?" echoed Nancy, staring at her friend in amazement. "It's so strange that you're saying that. It made me remember the dream I had last night."

"What did you dream?"

"I dreamed about this guy in a dirty red and green sweater." Nancy suddenly felt very uncomfortable. "And he had these fingernails that he scraped along things. Actually, they were more like knives or something, like he'd made them himself. Anyway, they made this horrible screeching noise." Nancy imitated the chilling sound of metal scraping against metal, and Tina sat up straight in her chair.

"You dreamed about the same creep I did," she said.

"That's impossible," said Glen as the two girls stared at each other. "Two people can't—"

He stopped abruptly and looked out the window.

"What is it?" whispered Tina.

"Nothing," said Glen.

"There's somebody out there."

"I didn't hear anything," said Nancy.

And then they all heard it—the thin, sharp sound of something scraping against the house, just outside the window.

"Jesus," whispered Tina.

It was Glen who made the first move. He unlocked the door and stepped out into the darkness.

"I'm going to punch out your ugly lights, whoever you are," he announced, but the only answer was a slight rustling in the bushes. Glen promptly turned around and headed back toward the house, but the two girls prodded him farther into the darkness.

"It's only a stupid cat," he said a little more loudly than necessary as he edged slowly toward the bushes. He stopped in his tracks as the unmistakable scraping sound again disturbed the silence of the night.

"Kitty, kitty?" said Glen, taking a few cautious steps forward. "Chow chow chow?"

There was no answer but complete and utter silence. Glen turned toward the girls with a shrug. He was about to speak when a large figure leaped out from behind a bush and threw him to the ground with a terrible shout.

Tina turned to run for help when she recognized the hulking figure of Rod Lane.

"And it's number thirty-six," the boy said, rising quickly to his feet, "bringing Lantz down just three yards from the goal with a brilliant tackle! And the fans go wild!"

Rod grinned wildly as he threw his arm around Tina's shoulders.

"What the hell are you doing here?" asked Tina.

"I come to make up," said Rod. He glanced toward the house. "Your ma home?"

"Of course," the girl lied. She noticed the metal object in Rod's right hand. "What's that?"

Rod held up a rusty old hand rake he had found lying in the yard and scraped it slowly against the side of the house. Tina winced as she heard the horrible screeching noise that had first attracted Glen's attention.

"Intense, huh?" said Rod, tossing the rake aside. "So what's happening? An orgy or something?"

"Maybe a funeral, you jerk," said Glen. He glared furiously at the boy who had just scared and humiliated him in front of the girls.

Rod turned to Glen sharply, and a switchblade knife suddenly appeared in his hand. Without a moment's hesitation, Nancy stepped between the two boys.

"It's a sleep-over date," she told Rod. "Just Tina and me. Glen was just leaving."

Rod stared at Glen for a few long seconds before closing the knife and slipping it back into his jacket pocket. Glen breathed a sigh of relief as Rod threw his arm around Tina again and laughed.

"You see his face?" he said, grinning as if he had just pulled off a brilliant practical joke. Then he glanced at the house again and sized up the situation. "Your ma ain't home, is she?" Without waiting for an answer, he took Tina by the arm and began dragging her toward

the house. "Me and Tina got stuff to discuss," he said. "We got her mother's bed. You two got the rest."

Nancy waited uncertainly for a few seconds and then turned to Glen.

"We should get out of here," she said.

Before Glen could reply, Tina reappeared at the front door. The top buttons of her blouse were already undone.

"You guys are hanging around, right?" she said. "Don't leave me alone with this lunatic."

Nancy watched as her friend disappeared back into the house. She knew Tina really wanted to spend the night with Rod, and yet...

"So we'll guard her together," said Glen, interrupting her thoughts. "Through the night."

Nancy looked at Glen and nodded.

"We're here for Tina, not for ourselves," she said. "Okay?"

In other words, Glen thought as he nodded in agreement, *I'm sleeping on the couch.* Sometimes he wished that Nancy could be a little more like her friend Tina.

"Why was she so bothered by a stupid nightmare, anyway?" he asked as they began walking back toward the house.

"Because it was scary that's all. Don't you think it's weird, both of us dreaming about the same guy?" Glen looked away, and Nancy felt a sudden chill. "You had a dream last night too, didn't you?"

Glen shrugged his shoulders.

"I never remember my dreams," he said. "All I know is, my mom's going to kill me when she does the wash. I practically ripped my sheet in half."

Nancy wanted to continue the conversation, but it was getting late and she was suddenly feeling very tired. She went inside with Glen and kissed him good night. Then she locked herself in Tina's bedroom, leaving Glen to make himself as comfortable as possible on the living room sofa. Glen was feeling tired too, and he might have fallen asleep immediately if it weren't for the sounds of passionate lovemaking that emanated from Tina's mother's bedroom. Glen couldn't help thinking about Rod and Tina furiously copulating upstairs while he and Nancy spent the night in separate rooms.

"Morality sucks," he said softly. Then he pulled the covers up over his head and tried to get some sleep.

Chapter 2

Tina had a reputation for being fast.

It wasn't something she was especially proud of, but it wasn't anything she lost sleep over, either. Tina knew she didn't really deserve her reputation. Sure, she had slept with a few boys, but that didn't mean she was some kind of pushover. She liked sex, and she knew how to protect herself. If she wanted to fool around once in a while, Tina figured it was nobody's damned business but her own.

"I knew there was something about you I liked," she said as she snuggled closer to Rod in her mother's bed that night.

"You feel better now, right?" he asked with a satisfied grin.

"Jungle man fix Jane," said Tina. Rod was definitely a little rough around the edges, but there was a vulnerable side to the boy that really turned Tina on.

"No more fights?" said Rod, his hand resting on Tina's small breast.

"No more fights," she agreed, feeling very sleepy and content. She thought about Nancy sleeping alone across the hall. It was hard for Tina to understand how her best friend could go out with a nice boy like Glen for so long without wanting to go all the way.

"Good night," said Rod, yawning loudly as he pulled the cover over his head. "No more nightmares for either of us, then."

Suddenly, Tina felt a cold chill race down her spine.

"When did you have a nightmare?" she asked.

"Guys have nightmares, too," said Rod. "You girls don't exactly have a corner on the market."

Tina stared at the unmoving figure beside her for a moment and then took a deep breath. She was glad to be here with Rod, and she wasn't going to let some dumb nightmare ruin things for her. Besides, she felt safe with Rod at her side. She watched him for a moment as he slept and then turned out the light.

Tonight, I'm finally going to get a good night's sleep, she thought. Even if it kills me.

She had not been asleep long when she heard the noise.

At first she thought it was just the faucet dripping. She tried not to pay attention, but the pinging noises were too loud and too persistent to be ignored.

"Rod?" she whispered, but the boy only snored steadily beside her. She sat up in bed, wondering how Rod could sleep through all the racket. There was another ping, and Tina realized it was coming from outside. She stepped into her slippers and reached the window in time to see a pebble bounce off the glass.

"Jesus," she whispered. It was windy out, and the trees were blowing wildly in the darkness.

Suddenly, a large stone smashed into the glass, startling Tina as a thin and ragged crack appeared inside the windowpane.

Somebody threw that, thought Tina, suddenly furious at whoever was out there disturbing her precious sleep. Without thinking, she dashed down the stairs and stepped out into the darkness.

"Who are you?" she demanded, her voice small and thin in the howling wind. For a moment, she considered going back inside to get her robe, but something seemed to compel her to step farther into the blackness instead.

Then she was at the gate, stepping outside before turning around to look at the house. Only she couldn't see the familiar old house on Elm Street anymore. Instead, she seemed to be in an alley that she vaguely remembered seeing before in a dream. It was completely quiet now, except for the rushing of the wind. Then the metal lid of a trashcan came clattering down the alley, crashing to a halt at Tina's feet. She stared at the lid for a moment and took a deep breath to calm herself.

She was still assuring herself that everything was all right when she heard the horrible scraping of metal on cinderblock.

And there in the darkness she saw the man from her nightmare, his steel finger-knives raising bright yellow sparks as they screeched horribly along the alley wall. Tina turned, looking for a place. She was about to make a break for the end of the alley when the horrible man suddenly extended his long bony arms along the full length of the narrow alleyway, cutting off the girl's only escape route.

"Oh God," she whispered.

"This is God," replied the man hoarsely, his twisted mouth grinning obscenely as he clicked his razor-sharp blades in Tina's face.

And then she was running. She didn't know how she slipped past the man in the red and green sweater, and there was no time to stop and think it over. Tina was running for her life, faster than she had ever run before. But as fast as she ran, the man with the deadly finger-knives was never more than a few steps behind her. Tina was gasping for breath now, knocking over trashcans to slow down her pursuer, but nothing she did seemed to make any difference. Whenever she glanced over her shoulder, there he was, his hideous face leering at her from beneath his crumpled fedora and his deadly blades glittering in the moonlight.

Then, abruptly, Tina was no longer on the city streets, running instead across what seemed like an endless stretch of identical suburban lawns. Tina shouted for help, sure that someone would hear her and save her from the maniac who seemed determined to kill her. But there was no answer to her desperate cries, and the only sounds Tina could hear were those of her own labored breathing and the pounding of her bursting heart.

And then she stopped for a second to catch her breath and looked behind her.

There was no one there.

Thank God, she thought, her lungs aching after her long, hard run. She looked around to get her bearings and suddenly realized that she was on her own block again. Boring old Elm Street had never looked lovelier. Tina took a deep breath and gazed fondly at the big elm tree that had stood at that corner for as far back as anyone could remember.

And there stood the man in the filthy sweater, a look of mad triumph on his face. Tina didn't know how he had managed to hide behind the very tree she had been looking at, but there he was, large as life and a thousand times more frightening. Tina turned and ran, suddenly uncertain which of the almost identical houses on the block was her. Then she saw it, the low brick wall her father had built in front of the house not long before her folks had split up. She ran toward the house, the madman's foul breath hot on her neck. It

seemed to take forever, but finally she reached the door and grabbed desperately for the knob.

Locked!

"Nancy!" she screamed, suddenly remembering that her friend was in the house. "Nancy! Open the door!"

"Nancy can't help you," said the madman, now standing behind her with a fiendish grin on his deformed face. "Nancy is still awake."

Still awake? thought Tina as she felt the razor-sharp blades slice through her thin nightgown and into her tender skin.

And suddenly she was inside, lying safely next to Rod in her mother's bed.

It was all just a dream, she told herself, smiling peacefully as her head sank back into the soft pillow. *Everything is going to be all right after all.*

Then she saw him, and she knew that nothing was going to be all right ever again.

Rod felt the bed shaking and opened his eyes.

"Tina?" he said, slowly remembering where he was and whom he was with. But there was no answer except for the anguished cries and moans that seemed to be coming from somewhere deep inside the mattress. His heart pounding, Rod yanked the cover off the bed. He stared in horror at the sight of Tina thrashing about wildly in her sleep. Then suddenly her body stiffened as if someone or something was pinning her to the bed, and her nightgown was roughly pulled open by unseen hands. Rod watched helplessly as four long bloody gashes appeared across the girl's stomach, followed by four more and then four more until Tina and the entire bed were soaked in a river of blood.

Rod screamed and reached for the light. Suddenly, Tina's body rose from the bed as if lifted by invisible hands and swung through the air like a human baseball bat, knocking Rod to the floor. He lay there and watched in mute horror as Tina's mangled corpse slid feetfirst up the bedroom wall, leaving behind a trail of gore.

"What the hell is going on?" Rod screamed, fighting back the tears and vomit as he watched the bloody pulp that was once Tina Gray hanging limp and lifeless from the ceiling, suspended by some

invisible and insanely sadistic power. His screams began in earnest as the girl's slashed remains plopped down like a sack of blood, splashing Rod and everything in the room as it hit the bed with a sickening thud.

Nancy sat up in bed just as the body fell from the ceiling. She arrived at the bedroom door just moments before Glen.

"What's going on?" asked Glen.

"I don't know," said Nancy, pulling on the door and finding it locked. From the other side, she could hear Rod's desperate threats.

"Who did this?" he screamed, glaring around helplessly in search of whoever or whatever had murdered Tina. "I swear I'll kill you for this!"

"Rod?" said Nancy, pounding on the door. "You'd better not hurt Tina!"

And then Rod began to make the horrible rasping noise that Nancy would never forget for as long as she lived. She was still trying to decide whether he was laughing or crying when Glen barreled into the door like the star football player that he was. The door burst open and Nancy rushed in.

And saw the blood.

Tina's blood.

The same blood that soaked the bed, the walls, the ceiling, and the curtains around the window through which Rod had made his escape.

And then Nancy saw the hacked remains of her friend's body.

She wanted to cry, but she didn't. Tears wouldn't bring Tina back to life, and they wouldn't catch the sadistic son of a bitch that had killed her.

Someone would pay for this. Nancy swore it even as the vomit began to surge upward from her throbbing guts.

Chapter 3

Don Thompson had never wanted to be anything but a cop.

Long after his boyhood pals had outgrown their dreams of becoming firemen or baseball players and settled for more mundane careers as accountants and insurance salesmen, Don Thompson continued in the pursuit of his lifelong ambition. He joined the Springwood Police Department right after being graduated from high school and quickly worked his way up through the ranks. By the time he earned his sergeant stripes, Don Thompson was happily married to his high school sweetheart and the father of a beautiful baby girl. Unfortunately, Marge Thompson soon discovered that the life of a police officer's wife was not nearly so exciting or glamorous as she had hoped. By the time Thompson made lieutenant, he was a divorcé with an ex-wife who drank too much and a beautiful teenage daughter whom he didn't see nearly so often as he wanted to.

Thompson was dreaming about the old days when he and Marge were still able to carry on a civil conversation when he was abruptly awakened by the emergency telephone call. He dressed quickly, gulped down a cup of coffee, and drove himself downtown to the police station. It was Jerry Parker, one of the new patrolmen, who met him at the door.

"What have you got?" asked Thompson, getting right down to business as usual. He would never admit it to anyone, but this was exactly the sort of case he used to fantasize about when he was a little boy dreaming about growing up to be a cop. Murders didn't happen every day in quiet suburban communities like Springwood, and the ones that did were usually open-and-shut cases of a drunken husband shooting his wife over some real or imagined infidelity.

"Razor was the weapon, according to the coroner," said Parker, glancing at the report in his hand. "Or razors, more likely. Looks like it was the victim's boyfriend that did it. Guy by the name of Lane."

"Lane," echoed the lieutenant, not sounding very surprised.

"Musician type. Couple of priors for brawling, drunk and disorderly. A real troublemaker. Anyway, we got no parents to claim

the body. According to the other kids, the father split a couple of years ago and the mother's in Vegas. We're trying to reach her now."

"Terrific," said the lieutenant as they reached the interrogation room. "What the hell was she doing there?"

"She lives there," said the puzzled patrolman.

"I don't mean *her*," said the lieutenant, sounding very annoyed. He turned to the girl who sat beside her mother in the brightly lit room. "I mean *you*."

Nancy Thompson looked up at her father.

"What was she doing there?" he demanded, turning angrily to his ex-wife.

"Hello to you too, Donald," said Marge Thompson, a cigarette in her trembling hand.

"Marge," he replied, struggling to control his quick temper. He took a deep breath and looked at Nancy. "How you doing, baby?" he asked, forcing himself to smile.

"I'm okay, Dad," said Nancy, disturbed by her father's unconvincing smile. She wondered if she looked anywhere near as bad as she felt inside.

"That's good," said the lieutenant, exchanging a worried look with his ex-wife. Then he looked hard into Nancy's eyes and took another deep breath. As a police officer, he knew he needed to be patient and tactful in extracting the necessary information from the girl. But as a father, there were questions he wanted answers to right away.

"I don't want to get into this now," he began. "God knows you need time." He paused for a second, and suddenly the anger and frustration of the frightened father overwhelmed the cool detachment of the trained cop. "But I'd sure like to know what the hell you were doing shacked up with three other kids in the middle of the night. Especially when one of them is a lunatic delinquent like Rod Lane."

Nancy recoiled as if she had been slapped.

"Rod's not a lunatic," she said, knowing even as she spoke how absurd her words must sound.

"You got a sane explanation for what he did?"

"Tell him how jealous Rod was," said Marge, placing a hand on her daughter's trembling shoulder. "Tell him about the fight they had."

"It wasn't that serious," said Nancy quietly, sloughing deeper in her chair as she struggled to make sense of the terrible thing that had happened that night.

"Not serious?" said her mother. "You don't think murder is serious?"

Then suddenly Nancy was sitting upright, her eyes flashing with indignation.

"Tina was my best friend in the whole world!" she shouted. "How can you say I don't take her death seriously?" Marge nodded to indicate her apology, and Nancy continued in a softer tone. "All I meant was that their fights weren't that serious." She was quiet for a moment, and then suddenly she remembered why Tina had asked her over in the first place. "Tina dreamed this would happen," she whispered, more to herself than to her mother or father.

"What?"

"She had a nightmare about somebody trying to kill her. That's why we were there. She was scared to sleep alone."

"Of all the—" the lieutenant began, but Marge cut him off in mid-sentence.

"Nancy's been through enough for one night," she said. "You have her statement." Then, ignoring her ex-husband's glare, she took her daughter's hand and stood up. Thompson was about to order them to sit down and then thought better of it.

He would have to have a long talk with Marge about the way she was bringing up their daughter, but this was clearly neither the time nor the place for that discussion.

Don Thompson was on the phone with his ex-wife early the next morning while Nancy stood transfixed in front of the television and listened to the local news.

"In the headlines this morning," said the announcer, "the brutal murder of a local teenage girl at an all-night party in Springwood.

Police say the victim, fifteen-year-old Tina Gray, had been arguing with her boyfriend shortly before last night's bloody slaying. The boyfriend, Rod Lane, is now the subject of a citywide manhunt. According to police, the murder weapon appears to have been a straight razor or similar sharp object..."

"I have to go," said Marge, promptly hanging up the phone as she rushed to turn off the television. She arrived too late to stop Nancy from seeing the film of the body bag being carried from Tina's house to the coroner's van. Marge wondered how much of his influence her ex-husband had used to keep their daughter's name out of the story and the reporters away from their door.

"Don't go to school today, kiddo," she said, taking Nancy in her arms and giving her a quick hug. "You need your sleep. I heard you tossing and turning all night."

"I've got to go to school, Mother," said Nancy, gently freeing herself from her mother's embrace. "Otherwise I'll sit up there and go crazy."

"Did you sleep at all?"

"I'll sleep in study hall," Nancy promised. "I'd rather keep busy, you know?"

Marge nodded and kissed Nancy on the forehead. Sometimes she wished she were as good as her daughter was at handling difficulties. For Marge, booze had always seemed like the easiest way to make troubles disappear.

"Come right home after?" she said.

"Right home," Nancy promised, hugging her mother one more time before picking up her books and heading off for school.

Nancy had only walked a few blocks when she began to get the feeling that she was being watched.

She turned around and noticed a tall man in dark glasses standing across the street. For a second she thought she saw the man staring at her.

My best friend just got killed, she thought. I guess I'm entitled to be a little jumpy.

She took a few more steps and then glanced back over her shoulder.

The man with the dark glasses was gone.

Don't be paranoid, she told herself, although she couldn't imagine how the man had managed to disappear so abruptly. Then she took a deep breath of the fresh morning air and walked a little more quickly toward Springwood High.

She was only a block away from school when a strong hand clamped over her mouth and she was dragged into the bushes.

Nancy had barely begun to struggle when she realized she was being held by Rod Lane.

"Don't scream," he whispered. "I'm not going to hurt you." He waited until Nancy stopped struggling before removing his hand from her mouth. "Your old man thinks I did it, don't he?"

"Did you?" asked Nancy as calmly as she could with her heart pounding like a jackhammer.

"Of course not," said Rod angrily "I never touched her."

"You were screaming like a madman."

"Someone else was there," he said, knowing even as he spoke how crazy he must have sounded.

Nancy looked at Rod for a long moment and shook her head. Instinctively, she knew he was telling the truth. And yet...

"The front door was still locked when the police came," she said, trying very hard to make sense of Rod's story. "And the bedroom door was locked from your side."

"Don't look at me like I'm some kind of fruitcake," said Rod. "I swear I never hurt Tina."

Nancy nodded and was about to say that she believed him when she realized he was staring over her shoulder.

"Good morning, Rod," said a familiar voice. Nancy turned to see her father standing behind her with his police .38 pointed squarely between Rod's eyes. "Now just move away from her, son. Really easy like your ass depended on it."

Rod looked at Nancy for just a second and then lunged wildly out of the bushes. Nancy stared in horror as her father raised his revolver to a firing position.

"No!" she screamed, jumping between Rod and her father.

"Are you crazy?" shouted Thompson, pushing Nancy aside as he took off after Rod. The chase was a short one. Rod had already been wrestled to the ground by the tall man in the dark glasses. Even as two uniformed policemen roughly shoved Rod into the squad car, Nancy could hear the boy insisting that he hadn't done anything. She waited until the car door slammed before turning angrily to her father.

"You used me!" she screamed.

"What the hell did you expect?" he asked, bewildered and more than a little annoyed by his daughter's attitude. "And what are you doing in school today, anyway?"

Nancy thought of a thousand things she wanted to say, but none of them seemed to express exactly what was in her heart at that moment. Instead, she simply turned away and strode briskly toward the school building.

"Hey, Nancy!" the lieutenant shouted, but his daughter ignored him and kept on walking. He stood there staring and wondering what in the hell was going on.

I guess I'll never understand women, thought Don Thompson as he turned around and walked slowly toward his car.

Chapter 4

It was hard enough to stay awake in Mrs. Solomon's English class under the best of circumstances. After two sleepless nights and the murder of her best friend, Nancy was finding it just about impossible to keep her eyes open.

Mrs. Solomon was reading a passage from *Julius Caesar*, and Nancy tried very hard to stifle a yawn. She was a good English student, but somehow she had never been able to warm up to Shakespeare. If only he had written in plain English and left out all those *methinks* and *forsooths*...

"In the most high and palmy state of Rome," read the teacher, her voice rising and falling dramatically as if to remind the class that they were listening to great poetry, "a little ere the mightiest Julius fell..."

Nancy jerked her head, suddenly realizing that her eyes had closed for just a moment.

"The graves stood tenantless," Mrs. Solomon continued, "and the sheeted dead did squeak and gibber in the Roman street..."

Squeak and gibber, Nancy silently repeated, her head now resting comfortably on her upturned palm. She wondered how much longer it would be until study hall. It would be so nice to sit in the back of the auditorium with her eyes closed, maybe even to take a little nap before her next class. She closed her eyes for a just a second, her breath slow and steady as the teacher droned on from the front of the room.

Then she heard someone softly call her name, and her eyes snapped open.

"Tina?" she whispered. She looked out into the hallway through the open classroom door and saw the body bag. It was the same size and shape as the bag she had seen on television, but it seemed to be moving ever so slightly.

Nancy shook her head and wiped the sleep from her eyes with the back of her hand. When she looked again, the bag was gone.

In its place was a long dark smear of dried blood.

"O God," continued Mrs. Solomon, "I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a kind of infinite space were it not that I have bad dreams..."

Bad dreams, echoed Nancy silently, slipping out of her seat. No one paid any attention as she turned and strode purposefully out of the room.

Then she heard Tina call her name once more.

There, at the end of the hall, was the body bag, one pale hand hanging out through the partially open zipper. Nancy watched as the bag slowly slid out of sight, leaving a dark trail of slime in its wake.

"Tina!" she called, racing down the hall and around the corner. She didn't see the hall monitor coming the other way until the two girls collided and fell to the floor.

"No running in the halls!" said the girl with the oversize badge pinned to her sweater as Nancy rose quickly to her feet. "Let me see your pass!"

Nancy looked down the hall and saw the body bag sliding slowly down a dimly lit corridor that she couldn't quite remember ever having seen before.

"Screw your pass!" Nancy shouted, pushing the other girl out of the way as she watched the bag turn into a narrow doorway. Nancy raced down the hall in time to hear the bag tumbling down a long flight of stairs.

"Hey!" yelled the hall monitor. Nancy turned and saw that the girl was now bleeding profusely from her eyes and ears. There was a smile on the girl's blood-smeared face and a wild look in her eyes as she waved at Nancy.

"No running in the halls," she said, her fingers tipped with long, razor-sharp knives.

Nancy turned away in horror. Stepping through the doorway, she saw a long narrow stairway and heard a steady throbbing noise from down below. Nancy hesitated for only a second and then followed the trail of slime down the stairs.

She was in a boiler room, but it was like no boiler room she had ever seen before, except perhaps in a vaguely remembered dream. There was something frighteningly oversized about everything in the

room, from the rumbling machinery itself to the seemingly endless network of tunnels, ladders, and catwalks. And everywhere there was steam, hot and suffocating. Nancy stood perfectly still and wiped the sweat from her forehead while her eyes slowly adjusted to the dim orange light that emanated from deep within the bowels of the massive boiler.

And suddenly she heard it—the horrible screeching of metal on metal that she still remembered so clearly from her last nightmare.

"Who are you?" she demanded, turning to face the man she knew she would see, the man in the dirty sweater and the deadly finger-knives.

But the man didn't answer. He only smiled as he slowly raked his razor-sharp nails across his own chest. Nancy gagged in disgust as the skin slowly parted to release a yellow fluid squirming with hundreds of tiny worms and maggots.

And then the chase was on. Nancy was running as fast as she could through a maze of steaming pipes, but the man with the razor-blade fingers was never more than a few steps behind. The openings seemed to be growing smaller and smaller as Nancy weaved her way through the labyrinth. She heard her own loud breathing and the pounding of her heart, and she knew she couldn't run much longer. Ahead of her was a brick wall and behind her the maniac with his blades of death. Nancy looked desperately to the left and to the right, but there seemed to be no escape. She stopped, her back to the wall and nowhere left to run. The madman stood before her, a twisted smile of victory on his ugly mouth as he flashed his blades in front of Nancy's face.

There must be some way out of this nightmare, thought Nancy, refusing even at that terrifying moment to give up hope.

This nightmare, she repeated, something strange and almost unfathomable suddenly clicking into place in her mind. Then, taking a deep breath, Nancy wheeled around and pressed her right forearm against one of the scalding steam pipes.

The pain was unlike anything she had ever felt, and her own scream echoed over and over again in her head as she fell to her knees in agony.

And then she was on her feet, only she was no longer in some dank and steamy boiler room. Rather, she was back in Mrs. Solomon's English class, standing beside her desk with her books clattering noisily to the floor.

"Are you all right?" asked Mrs. Solomon, rushing to the girl's side. Nancy looked around, still groggy from her nightmare, and discovered that every eye in the class was on her. She whirled around and stared at the open classroom door, half expecting to find the man with the finger-knives standing there, laughing his horrible raspy laugh.

The hallway was empty.

"I'll call your mother," said Mrs. Solomon, bending down to help Nancy retrieve her books.

"No!" said the girl with more emphasis than she had intended. "No, really, I'm all right. I'll just go home." She grabbed her books from the startled teacher and hurried quickly out the door.

"You'll need a hall pass!" shouted Mrs. Solomon, but Nancy was already out of earshot. She didn't stop walking until she was out of the building. When she reached the clump of bushes that Rod had pulled her into that morning to protest his innocence, Nancy stopped, put down her books, and rested against the cool bark of a nearby tree.

"I'm not going to cry," she said out loud. She took a deep breath and forced herself to think back to the terrible nightmare. It didn't seem so bad remembering that horrible boiler room when she was standing in the light of day breathing the fresh afternoon air. Still, the dream had seemed so incredibly real. And wasn't it just like the dream Tina had described the other day? It was all so weird, but Nancy was determined to find a logical explanation. "There's nothing to be afraid of," she whispered to herself. After all, a nightmare couldn't really hurt anybody, could it?

It wasn't until she reached down to pick up her books that Nancy saw the fresh scald mark on her right forearm.

"Is my dad here?" Nancy asked the burly desk sergeant at the police station.

Despite her promise, Nancy had not gone directly home. Instead, she had taken the bus to the police station where Rod Lane was being held on suspicion of murder.

The sergeant looked at Nancy for a moment and nodded, recognizing the same no-nonsense tone of voice he had so often heard from her father. The sergeant picked up his telephone, and a moment later Don Thompson stepped out of his office.

"Taking the day off after all?" he asked, smiling at Nancy. He stopped smiling when he saw the grimly determined look on the girl's face.

"Dad, I want to see Rod Lane."

"Only family allowed, honey. You know the rules."

"I just want to talk to him for a second."

"The kid's dangerous," said Thompson.

"You don't know that he did it."

"No, I don't know for sure," the lieutenant conceded. "What I do know is that he was in a locked room last night with a girl who went in alive and came out in a rubber bag."

Nancy flinched as if she had been struck.

"I just want to talk to him," she said, her voice now soft and pleading. "Please? Dad?"

Lieutenant Thompson glanced at the sergeant. The man behind the big oak desk shrugged his shoulders and quickly looked away.

You can't always go by the book, Thompson reminded himself. It was a principle that Marge had often insisted upon during the last stormy years of their marriage.

"Make it fast," he said, calling for a patrolman to show Nancy to the holding cell.

"Tell me everything that happened last night," said Nancy when she was alone with Rod Lane, and for the next several minutes Rod did exactly that.

"That's crazy," said Nancy when the boy finished his story.

"You think I don't know that?" he said, jumping nervously to his feet and pacing the small cell. Nancy thought he looked more like a

trapped animal than a human being.

"How could somebody get into bed and under the covers with you guys without your knowing it?" she asked.

"How the fuck do I know?" It was obviously a question to which Rod had given a great deal of unproductive thought. "I don't expect you to believe me anyway."

"Did you get a look at him?"

"No."

"Then how do you know somebody was there?"

"Because I saw him cut her!" Rod yelled. A guard poked his head into the cell and Nancy waved him away.

"Somebody cut her while you watched," she said quietly, "but you don't know what he looked like?"

Rod paused and then stared at the wall as he spoke.

"You couldn't see the fucker," he said, his voice low and seemingly far away. "You could just see the cuts happening, all at once. He cut her and dragged her around, up the wall, over the ceiling." He paused and swallowed, and Nancy saw that there were tears in his eyes. "And then he just dropped her. And there was blood. Blood everywhere." He stopped again and looked at Nancy, his eyes begging her to believe him.

"Tell me about the cuts," said Nancy, trying hard to control the tremble in her voice.

"It's like I said. It was as if there were four straight razors all cutting her at the same time. But the razors were invisible. She just... opened up."

He stopped suddenly and smashed his fist against the wall, his eyes now filled with tears.

"I could have saved her," he said, gasping for breath. "I could have moved faster. Only I was sure it was just another nightmare."

"Nightmare?" echoed Nancy.

"Yeah. Like the one I had before. There was this guy who had knives for fingers."

Nancy turned and grabbed hold of the bars, her knuckles white as she squeezed with all her might to keep from crying out loud. There was a long silence before Rod spoke again.

"You think I did it?" he asked.

"No," she said.

I only wish I did, she thought as the guard unlocked the door.

Chapter 5

Nancy Thompson soaked peacefully in the bathtub with her eyes closed and prayed that the hot sudsy water could somehow soothe away all her cares.

The last couple of days had been some of the longest and strangest days of her life, and not getting any sleep was definitely not helping her jangled nerves.

It was so pleasant, lying in the tub. Nancy felt as if she could almost forget about Tina and Rod and the man in the nightmare if she could just drift off into a long, peaceful slumber. Already, she could begin to feel reality fading quietly away as she slipped into a light, blissful sleep...

"Nancy!"

Nancy's eyes snapped open at the sound of her mother's voice calling her name from the other side of the door.

"What is it?" she asked, feeling somewhat annoyed at having been so abruptly awoken.

"Don't fall asleep in there," said her mother. "People drown in the bathtub every day, you know."

"Oh, Mother!" said Nancy. *I wasn't actually falling asleep*, she assured herself. *There's a big difference between falling asleep and resting your eyes.*

"I've got some warm milk for you," her mother continued. "Why don't you get out of there and jump into bed?"

"I'll be out in a few minutes," said Nancy. She waited until her mother walked away before adding, "Warm milk. Gross!"

I suppose I really should be getting out, thought Nancy as she settled back to enjoy one more relaxing minute in the tub. She closed her eyes again and began to sing softly the counting song she and the other neighborhood children used to sing when they were very small: "One, two, Freddy's coming for you. Three, four, better lock your door." She stopped and yawned. The warm water felt so nice...

And suddenly something was dragging her under the water. She tried to grab on to the sides of the tub, only it felt more like being in a

bottomless well than a bathtub. Down and down she went, until she could no longer see the surface of the tub. Kicking wildly, she struggled to free herself from whatever diabolical force was pulling her ever downward, trying to drown her in the cold, dark waters. She wanted to scream for help, but she knew that her only chance was to hold her breath for as long as she could and somehow fight her way back up to the light. Her lungs aching, she thrust her shoulders forward and arched her back, determined to save herself at any cost.

This can't be happening, she told herself over and over again, as if her believing it was all a dream would somehow make a difference.

And then she heard her mother's voice calling out her name. The voice was muffled and indistinct, but it was clear enough to serve as a precious link between Nancy and the world outside her nightmare. With one last burst of willpower, Nancy thrust her head and shoulders above the surface of the water and opened her eyes wide.

"Mommy?" she cried, gasping and choking as she filled her aching lungs with air. Her mother was kneeling at the side of the tub now, cradling her daughter's head in her arms as she began to wrap her with a large terrycloth bath towel.

"Are you okay?" asked Marge, rubbing Nancy gently with the towel. Nancy nodded, gazing in bewilderment at the tub that seemed only moments ago to be a bottomless pit. "Time to get into bed, young lady," said her mother, "and I don't want to hear any argument."

"Okay, Mom," said Nancy, still struggling to catch her breath. "Let me finish drying off and I'll be out in a minute."

"Promise?"

"Promise," said Nancy. Her mother paused for just a moment and then left the room.

Nancy was putting on her robe a few moments later when she noticed the dark scald mark on her right forearm. She gazed at it for a long time and then turned unhesitantly to the medicine cabinet. It only took her a few seconds to find the box of NoDoz and slip it into the pocket of her robe.

"And no school tomorrow either," said her mother as she escorted Nancy to her bedroom. "I want you to relax and get some rest."

"Okay, Mom," said Nancy, thinking that a little rest sounded awfully good.

"Take this." Her mother handed her a small yellow pill and a glass of water. "It'll help you sleep."

Nancy looked at her mother for a moment and then took the pill. She put it in her mouth and then swallowed the water.

"Sleep tight," said Marge, looking very relieved as she kissed her daughter on the forehead. "Things'll look brighter in the morning."

Nancy said good night and waited for her mother to leave the room. As soon as the bedroom door was closed, she spit the yellow pill into her hand and tossed it out the window. Then she popped a couple of NoDoz tablets into her mouth, turned on her bedside lamp, and settled back for what promised to be a very long night.

It was a little after midnight when Nancy heard the noise.

Slowly, as if in a dream, she climbed out of bed and walked toward the window. It was a windy night, and Nancy could hear the rustling of the curtains in the window across the street as they blew gently in the cool night breeze.

And then someone appeared out of the darkness, his hand clamped onto Nancy's mouth to muffle her scream. She was about to sink her teeth into the hand as hard as she could when she suddenly recognized a familiar class ring.

"It's me," whispered Glen, taking his hand away from her mouth. "I saw your light was on, so I thought I'd see how you were doing."

Nancy took a deep, calming breath and shook her head slowly from side to side.

"Sometimes I wish you didn't live right across the street," she said. Actually she was very glad to see Glen at that moment.

"Shut up and let me in," said Glen, climbing through the window. "You ever try balancing on a rose trellis on a windy night?" He entered the room and plopped down on the bed.

"If you don't mind," said Nancy, pointing at the chair with a slight smile on her face.

"So," said Glen, moving quickly to the chair, "I understand you freaked out in English today."

Nancy glanced at the door to make sure her mother hadn't heard.

"Guess I did," she admitted.

"Haven't slept yet, have you?"

"Not really."

"What did you do to your arm?" asked Glen.

"Burned myself in English class," she replied. Nancy looked at herself in the mirror and winced. "My God!" she said. "I look twenty years old!"

And that's when the plan began to take shape in Nancy's mind.

"Listen," she said, "I've got a crazy favor to ask."

"Uh-oh," said Glen.

"It's nothing hard. I'm just going to look for someone, and I need you to stand guard. Okay?"

"Sure," said Glen doubtfully. "I think."

"Listen," said Nancy, coming very close. "This is very important, and I don't want you to screw up. A whole lot might depend on it."

"I won't screw up," said Glen. "When did I ever screw up?"

"Just pay attention and listen," said Nancy, ignoring his question. She climbed back into bed and turned out the light. "Here's what we're going to do—"

"It's dark in here," Glen interrupted, a mischievous grin on his face.

"And it's not what you're thinking," said Nancy as she began to explain her plan.

Nancy is walking down Elm Street in her nightgown. The wind is howling, but Nancy doesn't feel cold. She is strangely exhilarated like a hunter in search of prey, but she feels the fear of the prey as well. With each step she takes, she is prepared for the sudden lunge of a madman from behind a tree or bush, but she is literally too tired to hide any longer. Besides, she knows that she is not alone.

"Are you still there, Glen?" she whispers, and she hears the boy's reassuring reply as if from a great distance.

Onward into the night she goes, and soon she is no longer walking past the neatly manicured lawns of suburban Springwood. It's darker now, and there's an alley up ahead. She hesitates for just a moment and then enters deeper into the shadows in determined pursuit of her quarry. At any moment, she expects to see the flashing of razor-sharp blades, and she prays that she can do what needs to be done before it's too late.

But nothing happens, and for a moment Nancy thinks that the waiting is no less terrifying than the confrontation that she both yearns for and fears.

"Glen?" she whispers. There is no answer. "Glen!" she repeats a little bit louder as a drop of sweat drips off the tip of her nose.

"I'm here," says the voice, but this time it is followed by a loud yawn.

"Stay awake," Nancy commands, but Glen doesn't reply.

Suddenly she is standing in front of the police station. There is a light on in the basement, and Nancy moves closer to peer inside. The window is barred, and through the window she sees Rod Lane sleeping on a hard cot. He's tossing and turning as if in the middle of some terrible nightmare. Nancy calls his name, trying to wake him, but it's no use. He can't hear her.

And then someone is inside the cell with him, and Nancy knows at once exactly who it is.

"Glen!" she says in a loud whisper, but there is no reply. She calls his name again but hears only the soft, steady sound of his snoring.

And inside the cell, the man with the dirty sweater and the battered fedora is holding Rod's bed sheet in his powerful hands, twisting it carefully into an instrument of death as he steps slowly toward the boy's sleeping form.

Without thinking, Nancy begins pounding on the glass behind the bars.

"Watch out!" she screams. Rod rolls over with a troubled groan as the madman's eyes shift to the girl outside the cell. They are ugly piggish eyes, and they are filled with a loathing beyond anything in

Nancy's wildest imaginings. As the monster takes a step toward Nancy, Rod sits up and opens his eyes. Suddenly, the madman is gone. Nancy screams Rod's name again, but the boy never looks in her direction. Instead, he throws himself back down on the cot and pulls the thin cover back over his broad shoulders. And there once again, standing in the shadows, is the man with the red and green sweater, the twisted sheet clenched tightly in his hands.

Suddenly, Nancy turns around and sees Tina staring at her from inside a body bag. The dead girl opens her mouth to speak, but only a long black centipede slithers out of her mouth. Nancy looks down to avoid her friend's dead eyes and sees an oozing mass of slimy snakes and eels swarming at the girl's feet.

"Glen!" she screams, turning her eyes away in disgust. She calls his name again, and this time there is a reply. The voice comes from directly behind her, but it is not the voice of Glen Lantz.

"I'm here," croaks the madman, his foul breath hot on Nancy's exposed neck.

Nancy pitches back just in time to avoid the deadly swoop of the creature's finger-knives. And then she begins to run, screaming Glen's name over and over again, but knowing that he won't answer.

Knowing that he has finally screwed up when it really counted.

And Nancy runs. She runs through city streets and down narrow alleyways, and always the man with the finger-knives is running right behind. Her heart and lungs bursting, Nancy finds herself running down suburban streets that seem strangely familiar and yet totally alien at the same time. For a moment, she thinks she sees her house, but it is merely some colonial-style house with a well-cared-for lawn like millions of such homes in suburban communities all over the country. *If I can get home, I'll be safe*, Nancy tells herself, although she knows there is no logical basis for her belief. Still, with death just a few feet behind, a girl has to believe in something if she's going to survive.

And then Nancy is on her own front lawn and racing toward the door. *I don't have keys*, she thinks, convinced for just a moment that the end is finally at hand. But the door is unlocked, and Nancy

pushes it open before throwing all her weight against the inside of the door and locking both locks from the inside.

"Glen!" she yells, but again she hears only his persistent snoring.

Nancy looks at herself in the hallway mirror. Her face is dirty and smeared with sweat and tears. She is still breathing hard and her pulse races, but she is beginning to feel as if maybe she is safe at last.

And then the silence of the night is broken by a terrible scraping sound at the window, and Nancy sees the madman scratching at the glass with his incredibly sharp blades. To her horror, the glass gives way at the edges and the leering madman pushes the rest of the window out of the frame with a frightening crash.

"Jesus!" says Nancy out loud as she runs up the stairs for the safety of her own private room. But the floor beneath her feet is no longer the solid surface it had always been before. The soft shaggy carpeting on the stairway has turned to something with the disgusting texture of quicksand, clinging to her ankles like warm molasses, slowing her movements to an agonizing crawl just when speed is most of the essence. Struggling slowly up the stairs with gooey globs of slime grasping at her ankles, Nancy hears the madman push his way through the window and stagger noisily across the living room.

And then she's in her room, the door securely locked behind her. She puts her ear to the door. Silence.

"This is just a dream," she reminds herself, glancing at her reflection in the full-length mirror on her closet door.

And then Nancy's image shatters into a thousand pieces as the mad killer crashes through the mirror and seizes her by the throat amidst a shower of broken glass!

They fall back on the bed, Nancy summoning every ounce of strength at her command to hold back the wrist of the killer's knife hand, its glittering blades just an inch from her throat. Nancy looks at the man's face, twisted with hate despite his sadistic grin, and senses that he is just playing with her, that he can break away from her grasp and slit her throat at any moment he might choose.

Suddenly, she lets go of his hand. She rolls away just as the deadly blades come down and slice through her new feather pillow. Feathers fly everywhere as Nancy rolls off the bed, searching for a corner of

sanctuary in her once safe and familiar room. The madman seems unperturbed by the blizzard of feathers that fill the room as he grabs Nancy by the wrist, knocking over the night table at the side of her bed as they tumble roughly to the floor. She is pinned beneath him now with no escape. She looks into his hideous face and sees a look of triumph on his scarred features that fills her with loathing. His deadly blades just an inch from her eyes, Nancy quickly decides upon her final act in life and spits in the madman's face.

"Die!" he whispers, and Nancy is prepared to do exactly that when the alarm clock at her side suddenly goes off with a deafening ring.

Nancy opened her eyes to find herself in bed. She looked around wildly before reaching over to turn off the alarm clock. In the chair next to the bed, Glen sat up and wiped the sleep from his eyes.

"You bastard," said Nancy, glaring at Glen with a fury greater than any she had ever known before in her life.

"What did I do?" asked Glen, truly bewildered by the anger and hurt in Nancy's voice. He reached out to her, but she pulled away and flattened herself against the wall.

"I ask you to do one simple thing," she said, her voice and eyes hard. "Just stay awake and watch me. Just wake me if it looks like I'm having a bad dream." She paused and shook her head, overwhelmed by the enormity of Glen's incompetence. "And what do you do? You fall asleep!"

Glen gazed at her in silence, unsure of what words to offer in his own defence. He was about to apologize when he heard Nancy's mother calling the girl's name.

"Shit!" he said and dashed out the window just as Nancy's mother appeared at the bedroom door.

"Are you okay?" Marge asked.

Nancy paused and took a deep, calming breath before making her reply. "I'm all right," she said. "I just had a little dream."

"Okay," said her mother doubtfully. "If you need anything, just call."

"Okay, Mom. Good night."

Marge said good night and closed the door behind her.

Nancy waited until she heard her mother's footsteps fade away before sitting up and glancing out the window.

"Glen?" she said. But all she saw was a single bone-white feather floating by in the moonlight.

Chapter 6

"I have to see Rod Lane right away," said Nancy.

The burly desk sergeant looked at her for a long moment and then looked at Glen standing beside her. The boy looked as if he had no idea what he was doing in the police station in the middle of the night.

"When I took the night shift," said the sergeant with a weary sigh, "I thought I'd have some peace and quiet for a change."

"It's urgent," said Nancy. "I have to see Rod right away."

The sergeant glanced at the clock on the wall over the door. "It's three o'clock in the morning," he said. "Your mother know you're out this late?"

Nancy was about to make up some sort of story when she saw her father emerge from his office with a Styrofoam cup of black coffee in his hand.

"Daddy!" she said. "What are you doing here?"

"It happens that I work here. There's an unsolved murder investigation going on, and I don't much care for unsolved murders. Especially ones that my daughter's mixed up in. The question is, What the hell are *you* doing here at this hour?"

"Nancy had a nightmare," said Glen. "She says Rod's in some kind of trouble, and..." His voice trailed off as his eyes met Lieutenant Thompson's icy stare.

"I just want to see if he's okay," Nancy told her father, her gaze unyielding and deadly serious.

"The guy's sleeping like a baby," said the lieutenant, glancing briefly at his watch. "Believe me, Nancy, your friend Rod isn't going anywhere tonight."

"Just check, Daddy," she pleaded. "That's all I'm asking."

Lieutenant Thompson looked hard at his daughter and then glanced at the sergeant. It had been a long day and a longer night, and the lieutenant was looking forward to going home and getting a good night's sleep. Obviously, he wasn't going anywhere until Nancy was safe and sound back on Elm Street.

"Just one look," he said at last. "And then I'm personally driving you back home." He nodded to the sergeant, who immediately opened the top drawer of his desk.

"Now where the hell did I put that key?" the sergeant muttered as he fumbled around in the open drawer.

And while the sergeant looked for the key, Rod Lane slept in a locked cell in the back of the police station. His rest was an uneasy one, however, for Rod was in the middle of a nightmare. Only this nightmare was more real, more terrifying than any nightmare Rod had ever had before. This nightmare was about a deformed madman who wore a dirty sweater and a crumpled hat and had only one obsessive thought in his twisted mind.

The madman wanted Rod dead.

And in his dream, Rod fought mightily with the man in the red and green sweater, knowing even as he struggled that his own mortal strength was no match for that of the maniac who was determined to take his life.

If Lieutenant Thompson had arrived a few moments earlier, he would have seen Rod's bed sheet begin to move as if it had a life of its own. He would have watched in stunned disbelief as the sheet slithered like some deadly snake, twisting tighter and tighter as it inched ever closer to the sleeping figure, then forming itself into a noose and slipping gently around Rod's throat, tightening suddenly around his windpipe with a terrible snap as it jerked the boy upright in bed, his face contorted in a grotesque mask of frozen agony.

Instead, Nancy and Glen and the two policemen arrived at the cell just in time to find Rod Lane's lifeless body hanging from the bars of the high window.

"Shit," said Glen, turning almost as pale as the sheet knotted tightly around Rod's broken neck.

"Give me a hand," said Lieutenant Thompson, rushing into the cell to cut the boy down. Together, Glen and the two policemen lowered Rod's body and arranged it carefully on the unmade cot from which it had been roughly dragged by unseen hands only moments before. Nancy's father looked at his daughter with an expression halfway between anger and total bewilderment. After all his years on the

force, Don Thompson was sure that he knew a potential suicide when he saw one, and Rod Lane hadn't fit the pattern at all.

"How did you know this was going to happen?" he asked, but Nancy only gazed silently into the darkness.

Despite her parents' objections, Nancy joined the small crowd of mourners who attended Rod's funeral later that week. It was a rainy morning, and the mud stuck to Nancy's shoes as she made her way across the wet ground.

For some reason, she found herself thinking of the staircase at home.

"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust..."

The minister droned on and on, but nobody seemed to be paying much attention to what he was saying. Rod had never been the sort of boy who attended church, and Nancy doubted that he would have approved of the Bible-quoting minister who now presided over his funeral.

"He who lives by the sword shall die by the sword," said the minister as Nancy spotted Tina's mother in the back of the crowd. Nancy wondered if Mrs. Gray had really believed that it had been Rod's switchblade knife that had brought her daughter's life to such a bloody end.

"... and may Rod Lane rest in peace," the minister concluded. Nancy stepped forward and tossed a handful of dirt into the shallow hole that would be Rod's resting place for eternity.

Or until the worms finish with him, thought Nancy with a grim smile as she watched the casket being lowered into the ground.

"Time to go home," said Marge Thompson, gently taking her daughter by the hand. Nancy looked at her parents, silently noting that it had taken the murder of two of her friends to bring the three of them together again as a family. They walked toward the station wagon in silence, and it was not until Marge opened the door that Nancy finally spoke the thought that had been on her mind ever since she saw Rod's body hanging in the police station cell.

"The killer's still loose, you know."

"What are you talking about?" asked Marge, convinced that a good night's sleep was all Nancy really needed.

"Are you saying somebody else killed Tina?" asked Lieutenant Thompson. He was still trying to figure out how his daughter had forseen Rod's suicide.

Nancy stared off into the distance and shrugged her shoulders.

"I don't know who he is," she said. "But he's burned, and he wears a weird hat and a dirty red and green sweater."

"Go on," said Thompson, his face suddenly drained of color.

"And he's got these knives," Nancy continued, "only they're more like some kind of fingernails." She looked at her mother, who had turned as pale as her ex-husband. "And he's trying to kill me, just like he killed Tina and Rod," Nancy added, her voice hoarse and trembling.

"I think you'd better stay home a few days," said the lieutenant in a very low voice. Marge nodded in agreement.

"It won't do any good," said Nancy, a weird sort of smile on her face. "I keep dreaming about this guy, just the way Tina did. And probably the way Rod did, too. Tina dreamed he was going to get her, and he did. Now he's after me." She paused and looked into her father's eyes. "Will you find him, Daddy? Please? He's going to get me if you don't stop him."

The lieutenant looked at Marge, cleared his throat, and then looked away. Marge took Nancy in her arms and whispered softly into her ear. "We're going to help you, baby," she said. "No one is going to threaten you anymore."

"Daddy?" said Nancy as her mother ushered her into the front seat of the car and started the engine. She was still looking into her father's distant eyes as the car slowly pulled away from the cemetery.

The Katja Institute for the Study of Sleep Disorders was a relatively new division of the university's world-renowned school of medicine. Under the very capable leadership of its young founder

and director, Dr. Samuel King, the Institute was quickly achieving well-deserved fame of its own as the front-runner in the rapidly expanding specialty of sleep-related pathologies.

Nancy Thompson was not at all unhappy about finding herself lying on a very comfortable bed in one of the Institute's carefully designed sleep chambers. Despite the various electrodes and sensors that were fastened to her head and body, Nancy was looking forward to closing her eyes under the watchful gaze of the kind-looking Dr. King and finally getting the sleep that her body so desperately yearned for.

"Don't worry," said Dr. King as the nurse finished applying the last of the electrodes. "You're not going to turn into the Bride of Frankenstein or anything."

Nancy smiled, hoping that they would soon get to the part of the experiment where she actually got to close her eyes and go to sleep. Dr. King glanced at his clipboard and then turned to Nancy's mother.

"Did Nancy have any severe childhood illnesses? Scarlet fever? High temperatures? Concussions?"

"No, nothing," said Marge, sounding almost apologetic.

"He means," said Nancy, smiling at her mother, "did you ever drop me on my head?" The doctor laughed, but Marge only shook her head as if unaware that Nancy was joking.

"Nightmares are often the natural by-products of psychological trauma," Dr. King explained, speaking to both Nancy and her mother. "They almost always fade in time."

"I don't see why you can't just give me some kind of pill to keep me from dreaming," said Nancy. She was beginning to believe that dreamless sleep was the next best thing to paradise.

"We all need to dream," said the doctor. "We've tried depriving volunteers of dreams, and they usually get very, very weird."

"I never used to dream much," said Nancy.

"Everyone dreams every night, whether they remember their dreams or not," Dr. King replied. "We don't know why yet, but dreaming is something we just have to do." The doctor paused, checked his clipboard, and then looked at Nancy again. "I guess we're just about ready to begin."

"We'll be right here," said Marge, squeezing her daughter's hand. "There's nothing to worry about. Please trust us."

"It's not you I don't trust," said Nancy. "It's just..." She stopped in mid-sentence and shrugged. There was no point in trying to explain again. "Let's do it," she said.

Her mother smiled weakly and kissed Nancy one more time before following Dr. King out of the sleep chamber and into the observation room. She gazed at her daughter through the one-way mirror while the doctor checked the readings on a panel of glowing dials and gauges.

"Everything seems perfectly normal so far," he said, making a slight adjustment on one of his instruments. Marge noticed that his manner was a bit more somber now that Nancy was out of earshot. "How long has all this been going on?"

"Since the murder," said Marge. "She was fine before that. Now she seems to think her dreams are, well... real."

"Do you know the old Buddhist tale about the king who dreamed he was a beggar who dreamed he was a king?" asked the doctor, his eyes fixed on Nancy as she began to fall asleep on the other side of the glass. "Half of what our ancestors believed, today we think is utter nonsense. Flat earth. Dragons. Demons. Who's to say that our great-grandchildren won't be laughing at us someday for failing to see that dreams are merely part of some greater reality?" He glanced at Marge for just a second before looking back at his instrument panel. "Good. She's asleep."

"Thank God," said Marge, looking for the first time at the battery of meters, gauges, and graphs that were tracing her daughter's various vital functions while she slept.

"We're monitoring her brain waves with extreme accuracy," said Dr. King, pointing vaguely at one of the lighted dials. "As soon as she starts dreaming, we'll know exactly what's going on."

Marge sat back in her chair and took out a pack of cigarettes. She noticed Dr. King's disapproving look and put the cigarettes back in her purse.

"What the hell are dreams, anyway?" she asked, largely to divert herself from the powerful nicotine craving.

"Mysteries," said Dr. King. "The truth is, we really don't know what they are or where they come from. As for nightmares..." He paused and shrugged his shoulders. "In any event," he continued, "there seem to be no signs of abnormality in Nancy's EEG or pulse rate. I'd guess that what we have here is a normal young girl who just happens to have gone through a couple of days of hell."

Marge gazed through the window to see Nancy peacefully sleeping, and wondered if maybe she hadn't been making a big fuss over nothing after all.

"Here we go," said Dr. King. Marge looked to where he was pointing and saw a needle move all the way to the left. "She's entering deep sleep now. Her heart rate's a little high, but that's just due to anxiety. This is the phase of sleep where dreams take place." He paused and smiled. "Just about now I feel like I'm monitoring a diver on the bottom of an unmapped sea."

Marge watched as her daughter's face relaxed, the tension gone from her shoulders as she curled into an almost fetus-like ball.

"She's starting to dream now," said the doctor, his eyes glued to the close-up of Nancy's face on the video monitor next to the control panel. "See the rapid eye movements? The eyes actually move to follow action in the dream." He paused, glanced at one of the gauges, and made a note on his pad. "Beta waves are slowing, too. See this graph here?" Marge reluctantly looked away from her daughter's sleeping figure to glance at the slowly moving graph beside the monitor. "Notice how the needle fluctuates between plus and minus three. Those are typical dream parameters. A nightmare might read plus or minus five. Maybe six at the outside. Right now—"

Suddenly, the doctor stopped and tapped the gauge with his finger. Marge looked out and saw Nancy straining to sit up, her neck stretched forward like that of an animal preparing to flee from a predator.

"What's she doing?" Marge demanded, but the doctor was still staring at his instruments in disbelief.

The needle on the graph was reading plus eight and still climbing.

And then a scream of terror penetrated the thick glass, and a dozen red and green lights began to flash on the instrument panel. In the

sleep chamber, Nancy's body had arched upward, twisting and turning as if jolted by a massive voltage of electricity.

"Oh my God," cried Marge, but Dr. King was already out the door and standing at Nancy's side. He grabbed her by the arm and tried to shake her awake, but Nancy continued to scream and flail as if the devil himself were grabbing her arm. Suddenly, her free arm shot forward with incredible force, sending Dr. King crashing into the one-way mirror. The nurse, who was about to join Dr. King in his effort to awaken the girl, decided instead to stand back and wait for further instructions.

It was Marge now who was holding her daughter's shoulders and trying to shake her out of her sleep, but her efforts were futile. Nancy was screaming and cursing, her vicious threats almost as shocking to Marge as the look of terror and fury on the girl's contorted features.

"Nancy!" screamed Marge at the top of her lungs. "It's Mom! It's Mommy!"

And then Nancy was awake. Her eyes open but glazed, she surveyed the room like some cornered animal. Her breathing was fast and shallow, and her face was covered with sweat as if she had been running for her life. She wrapped her arms around her mother and began to cry in a series of gut-wrenching sobs. Slowly, Dr. King approached with a hypodermic needle in his hand.

"This is just going to let you relax and sleep..." he began, but Nancy immediately lashed out with the back of her hand and sent the needle flying against the wall.

"No!" she said, a wild but determined look in her eye. "That's enough sleep."

Dr. King looked into the fire behind her eyes and nodded his head.

"Fair enough," he said, reaching out his hand in a gesture of peace. Nancy hesitated for a moment and then took his hand. Exhausted, she fell back onto the pillow.

That was when Dr. King noticed the bloody gash on Nancy's forearm.

"Get my kit!" the doctor shouted, and the nurse scrambled away.

Nancy looked almost calm now, a smile of victory on her pale white lips as the doctor applied pressure to her bloody wound.

"I brought something out from my dream," she said, reaching beneath the tangled sheets and pulling out a crumpled old fedora hat.

"Where did you get that?" asked Marge, her face as white as her daughter's.

"I grabbed it off his head," said Nancy, feeling calm and in control of her own destiny for the first time in days.

Chapter 7

Marge was leaning against the refrigerator, holding the filthy hat in her hand as she talked to Don Thompson on the telephone.

"She said she snatched it off his head in the dream," Marge explained. She knew how crazy it sounded, and she wasn't surprised when her ex-husband expressed that very thought. "I know it's impossible," she said, "but I'm holding the damned thing in my hand! All I know is—" She stopped abruptly at the sound of Nancy's footsteps on the hall stairs. "Gotta go," said Marge, stuffing the hat into a drawer as she hung up the phone.

Nancy didn't say good morning as she stepped into the kitchen and poured herself a cup of black coffee. Her skin had taken on a pale, almost translucent quality, and her eyes were ringed with dark circles. A streak of gray had appeared overnight in her uncombed hair.

"You didn't sleep again, did you?" said Marge, gazing uneasily at the bloody bandage on her daughter's right arm. Nancy just sighed and sipped the hot coffee. "The doctor says you have to sleep or you'll —"

"Go even crazier?"

"No one thinks you're crazy," said Marge. Nancy looked at her and shrugged as if the question were irrelevant.

"Did you ask Daddy to have the hat examined?"

"That filthy hat?" Marge said, avoiding the girl's eyes. "I threw that thing away yesterday. I don't know what you're trying to prove with it, but—"

"I'm trying to prove what I learned at the dream clinic," said Nancy, her eyes shining with her newfound conviction. "I had it all wrong, Mom. I haven't been dreaming the future at all. I've been dreaming reality. Rod didn't kill Tina. And he didn't hang himself. It's this guy. He's after us in our dreams. First Tina and then Rod. And now he's after me."

Marge shook her head violently from side to side. "That's not reality, Nancy!" she insisted.

"It's real enough for him to cut me," Nancy said, holding out her arm. "Real enough for me to grab his hat and have it in my hand when I woke up."

Marge opened her mouth, but no words came out. There were things she wanted to say, and yet...

"What are you afraid of?" asked Nancy, sensing her mother's predicament. "What do you know that you're not telling?"

"I'm not afraid of anything except what's happening to you," Marge lied, glancing for just a moment at the drawer near the telephone. Nancy followed her mother's gaze and suddenly yanked open the drawer.

"Is this real?" Nancy demanded, holding the hat triumphantly in the air. "Is this just something I dreamed about?"

"Give me that damned thing!" demanded Marge, but Nancy was too fast.

"His name is even in it." Nancy's heart was pounding as she looked inside the battered hat. "Fred Krueger. Do you know who that is, Mom? You better tell me if you know, because he's after *me* now!"

"Trust your mother for once," Marge begged, pouring herself a drink. Nancy knew that her mother had once had a serious drinking problem, but she had been assured time and time again that the problem was under control. Judging by the glazed look in her mother's eyes, Nancy guessed that the woman had been hitting the bottle pretty hard during the past couple of hours. "You'll feel better as soon as you get some sleep."

"Feel better?" Nancy held up her bandaged arm. "You call this feeling better? Or maybe I should just grab that bottle and veg out with you. Get good and loaded—"

Suddenly, Marge reached out and slapped Nancy across the face.

"Damn it," said Marge, the tears welling up in her eyes as she snatched the hat away from Nancy, "Fred Krueger is dead!"

Nancy stared at her mother in horror.

"You knew about him all along?" she said, more outraged by her mother's act of betrayal than by her unprecedeted physical assault. "You knew who this maniac is, and you kept acting like he was someone I made up?"

"You're sick, Nancy," said Marge, turning away to avoid her daughter's eyes. "You're imagining things. You just need some sleep, that's all."

"Screw sleep!" screamed Nancy, sweeping her injured arm across the table and sending her cup of coffee crashing to the floor. She jumped to her feet, grabbed her jacket from the hook on the wall, and bolted toward the back door.

"Nancy!" Marge shouted, her eyes filled with tears. "It's just a nightmare, for God's sake!"

Nancy turned in the doorway and glared at her mother with eyes of rage.

"That's enough!" she said before slamming the door behind her.

Glen sat on the hood of his red convertible and munched on a Big Mac. The car was parked on the edge of Lookout Drive, the scenic overlook that Glen and Nancy had visited many times in the past to make out while enjoying a spectacular view of the valley below. Today, Glen knew, there would be no making out. Judging by the way Nancy was absorbed in the book she had brought along, Glen doubted that she would even be noticing the view. He took another bite of his sandwich and realized that Nancy was staring at him.

"Whenever I get nervous I eat," he said.

"Or sleep," she added.

"I used to," said Glen. "Not anymore." There was an awkward pause before he spoke again. "You ever read about the Balinese way of dreaming?"

"No," said Nancy. She set her book aside and gave the boy her full attention. It was rare that Glen talked about anything besides food, football, or the adolescent male's physical need for sexual intercourse.

"They got a whole system they call dream skills." He jumped down from the car to sit on the ground next to Nancy. "Say a person in Bali dreams they're falling or something. Instead of screaming and getting all upset, they just say, 'Okay, I'm going to fall, but instead of

getting splattered all over the ground, I'm going to fall into a magic world."

"A magic world?"

"Right. A magic world where you can get something special, like a gift of wisdom or a great song. That's where they get all their art from. From dreams. They just wake up and write it all down."

"And what if they meet a monster in their dreams?" asked Nancy.
"Then what?"

"They turn their backs on it," said Glen, beginning to improvise.
"That takes away its energy, so it disappears."

Nancy glanced at her book again, but Glen sensed that she was still thinking about what he had said.

"What happens if they don't do that?" she asked. "What happens if they don't turn away in time?"

Glen shrugged. "I guess those people don't wake up to tell what happened," he said.

"Thanks a lot," said Nancy, turning back to her book in earnest.

Glen tipped back the cover of the book and read the title. "*Booby Traps and Improvised Antipersonnel Devices?* Where the hell did you find that?"

"Survivalist bookstore downtown," said Nancy without looking up from the page.

"Well, how come you're reading it?" asked Glen.

Nancy looked up thoughtfully. "I'm into survival," she said.

"You're starting to scare me," said Glen, taking another bite of his Big Mac.

I'm starting to scare myself, thought Nancy.

Nancy's feelings of impending doom grew even stronger an hour later when Glen dropped her off at her house on Elm Street.

Every window in the house had been covered with brand-new iron bars.

"What's going on around here?" Nancy demanded, finding her mother inside, a bottle of gin clutched tightly in her fist. Marge

looked at her daughter for a long time before replying.

"Come down to the cellar with me," she said.

Nancy followed her mother down the stairs and sat beside her in front of the old furnace.

"All right," said Marge, looking Nancy squarely in the eye for the first time in days. "You want to know who Fred Krueger was? I'll tell you. Freddy Krueger was a filthy childkiller who got at least twenty kids before we stopped him. Kids from around here. Kids we all knew. It drove us all crazy when we didn't know who was doing it, but it was even worse when they caught him."

"Did they put him away?" Nancy suddenly felt very warm despite the chill in the air.

Marge shook her head.

"Some lawyers got fat and the judge got famous, but someone forgot to sign the search warrant in the right place, and Fred Krueger was free. Just like that."

"So he's alive?"

Marge shook her head slowly from side to side.

"A bunch of us parents tracked him down after they let him go. We found him in the old abandoned boiler room, where he used to take his kids..."

"Go on," said Nancy, flinching at the words "boiler room."

"He was lying there in that red and green sweater he always wore, drunk as a skunk with those horrible knives on the floor next to him. We poured gasoline all around the place, left a trail out the door..." Marge paused and gazed off into the distance. "Then we lit the whole thing up and watched it burn."

Nancy stared at the slightly inebriated middle-aged woman sitting beside her and tried to picture her as part of an angry mob taking justice into its own hands. It was not an easy image to conjure up.

"So you see, Nancy," said Marge, oblivious to her daughter's thoughts, "you have nothing to worry about. He can't get you. He's dead. Mommy killed him."

She reached into the old furnace and pulled out an object wrapped in rags.

"I even took his knives," she whispered, unwrapping the horrible bladed glove that Nancy recognized from her dreams.

Nancy stared at the obscene object in her mother's hand and tried desperately to make sense of things that made no sense. Freddy Krueger was dead, and dead men don't take revenge on the living. Not even in their worst nightmares.

Then Nancy looked at her arm and saw that her wound had begun to bleed.

Chapter 8

Glen was in bed watching a rerun of his favorite sitcom when the telephone rang.

"Hello?"

"Hi."

"Nancy! How're you doing?"

"Okay. Stand by your window so I can see you. You sound like you're a million miles away."

Glen did as he was told and saw Nancy through the bars on her bedroom window.

"Your mom really went nuts at the security store," he said. "You look like the Prisoner of Zenda or something."

"Thanks," said Nancy.

"How long has it been since you slept?"

"I think it's been seven days. It's okay, though. I checked Guinness, and the record's eleven. I can beat that with my eyes closed." Nancy paused and laughed weakly at her own joke. "Listen, Glen," she said, her voice now deadly serious, "I know who he is."

"Who?"

"The killer."

"You do?"

"Yeah, and if he gets me, I'm pretty sure you'll be next."

"Me?" Suddenly, Glen was taking the whole conversation a lot more seriously. "Why would anyone want to kill me?"

"Don't ask," said Nancy. "Just give me some help nailing this guy when I bring him out."

"Bring him out of what?"

"My dream."

For a moment Glen wondered if his parents weren't onto something when they pointed out that Nancy Thompson was getting very strange lately.

"How are you going to do that?" he said after a long pause.

"Just like I did the hat. Only this time I'll have my hands on the killer when you wake me up."

"Wait a minute," said Glen. "You can't really bring someone out of a dream."

"No problem then," said Nancy. "If I can't do it, then everyone can relax, because it'll just be a simple case of me being nuts."

"I can save you the trouble," said Glen with a grin. "You're nutty as a fruitcake, but I love you anyway."

"Good. Then you won't mind coldcocking the guy when I bring him out."

"What?"

"It's really simple," said Nancy. "I grab him in the dream; and when you see me struggling, you wake me up. We both come out, you whack the sucker, and we've got him. Clever, huh?"

"Are you crazy? What am I supposed to hit him with?"

"You're a jock," said Nancy, sounding slightly annoyed. "You must have a baseball bat or something. Just meet me on my porch at midnight, all right? And whatever you do, don't fall asleep."

Glen waited for Nancy to hang up before flopping down on his unmade bed.

"Oh man," he said out loud, shaking his head slowly from side to side. "Midnight. Baseball bats and bogeymen. Beautiful."

Several hours later, Glen's mother went upstairs to say good night to her son. She knocked gently on the bedroom door and called his name. There was no answer.

"Glen? Are you all right?"

Silence.

"Glen, honey?"

She waited a few seconds and then opened the door.

Glen was sprawled across the bed in front of the television set, his eyes shut tight and rock music blaring through his stereo headphones. Mrs. Lantz switched off the television and the stereo before poking Glen gently in the ribs with a loosely clenched fist.

Glen opened his eyes, yawned, and slipped off his headphones.

"How can you watch TV and listen to the stereo at the same time?" asked his mother, smiling fondly at the sleepy teenager.

Glen lazily returned his mother's smile and swung his long legs over the side of the bed.

"I wasn't listening to the tube," he explained. "Just watching. Miss Nude America's supposed to be on tonight."

"How are you going to hear what she says?"

"Who cares what she says?"

"Don't be such a smart guy," said Mrs. Lantz. She gave the boy a playful swipe with the back of her hand. "You should get to sleep, Glen. It's almost midnight. God knows we all need our rest after what's been going on around here lately."

"I'll turn in soon, Mom. You and Dad going to sleep now?"

"Pretty soon," she said. "Get to sleep." She kissed the boy good night and left the room.

Glen waited until his mother had closed the bedroom door before turning the TV back on. He glanced at the clock.

Eleven forty-two.

Plenty of time before midnight, he thought, clamping the headphones back on and turning the stereo on loud. Then he lay back to rest his eyes for just a minute before heading off to Nancy's house.

Across the street, a similar scene was being enacted at the Thompson house. Nancy was lying in bed while her mother busily gathered up empty coffee cups and boxes of NoDoz.

"Get some sleep," said Marge, still a little tipsy as she kissed Nancy tenderly on the forehead. "The nightmare's over, honey." Marge glanced at the bars on the bedroom windows and felt strangely comforted. "Everything's going to be all right from now on."

"Okay, Mom," said Nancy, barely able to keep her eyes open.

Marge hesitated for a moment, then picked up the coffeepot from Nancy's night table and turned off the light.

"Night-night," she whispered. Nancy closed her eyes and pulled the blanket up over her shoulders as her mother tiptoed out of the room and closed the door quietly behind her.

Five seconds later, Nancy's eyes snapped open.

She jumped out of bed and took several deep breaths to fight off the sleep that felt like some powerful physical entity trying to envelop her. Reaching under her night table, she found the full pot of coffee that she had stashed there earlier and poured some into the large mug she had hidden beneath her pillow. She rapidly drained the cup and then stepped over to the window. She opened it, pressed her face against the bars, and sucked in the cool night air.

At that moment, Glen's father was standing on his porch, smoking one last cigarette before turning in for the night. He glanced up at Nancy's bedroom window and saw the girl's pale face just before she pulled down the shade.

"You really shouldn't stare," said Mrs. Lantz. Her husband crushed the cigarette butt under his shoe.

"If you ask me," he said, still staring at the Thompson house, "that kid is some kind of lunatic."

"You know you don't mean that," said Mrs. Lantz. "If you mean the bars, that's just Marge being extra cautious. You know how jumpy she's been since Don moved out. Besides, with Nancy acting so nervous lately—"

"All I know," her husband interrupted, "is I don't want that strange girl hanging around with our boy anymore."

"Come to bed," said Mrs. Lantz. She took her husband by the hand and pulled him gently toward the house. "It's almost midnight."

Nancy looked at the clock on her night table and wondered what the hell was keeping Glen.

Across the street, Glen was fast asleep, the headphones blasting loud music in his ears while the television flickered its colored lights in his face. He slept right through Miss Nude America and never even heard the telephone ring.

Downstairs, his father had just turned off the lights.

"Who the hell could be calling at this hour?" he demanded as his wife lifted the receiver to find out.

"Hello?... Hold on." She covered the mouthpiece. "It's *her*," she whispered. "She wants to speak to Glen."

"About what?" asked Mr. Lantz, sounding very annoyed as he glanced at his watch.

"What's this about, Nancy?" Mrs. Lantz asked. She listened for a moment and then covered the mouthpiece with her hand again. "She says it's private. Very private and very important."

"Give me that," said Mr. Lantz, grabbing the receiver from his wife. "Glen's asleep," he said. "Talk to him tomorrow." Without waiting for a reply, he slammed down the telephone. "You have to be firm with kids," he told his wife. He glanced back at the phone and then took the receiver off the hook for good measure. "Let's get some sleep," he said, feeling really in control for the first time that day.

Nancy dialed Glen's number again and got a busy signal.

"Please don't be asleep," she whispered, staring helplessly out the window.

Then the phone rang and Nancy snatched it up.

"Glen?"

But all she heard was the horrible screeching sound of metal scraping against metal.

Nancy slammed the phone down, a pulse now throbbing in her temples. In anger and frustration, she yanked hard on the phone, ripping it out of the wall.

Brilliant, she thought, picking the phone up and dropping the useless instrument on her bed. *Now what if Glen tries to call?* She

stepped over to the window and stared helplessly at the house across the street.

And then the phone rang again.

Nancy whirled around and stared as the disconnected telephone rang a second time. Slowly, almost as though she were moving through water, Nancy reached out her hand and picked up the receiver.

"Hello?" she said.

"I'm your boyfriend now, Nancy," said the triumphant voice of Fred Krueger.

Before Nancy could say a word, the mouthpiece of the telephone suddenly turned into a mouth, its long, snaky tongue darting out and insinuating itself disgustingly between Nancy's parted lips.

Nancy threw the phone down, smashing it into the wall. She stared at the obscene instrument in horror, still tasting the foul tongue in her mouth.

And suddenly, the meaning of Fred Krueger's strange message became clear to her.

"Glen!" she screamed, running out of her room and down the stairs to the front door.

"Locked!" said her mother's slurred voice from the living room couch. "Locked, locked, locked. I locked it all up." There was a drunken smile on Marge's face. "You're going to sleep tonight if it kills you."

"Give me the key, Mother," said Nancy, knowing even as she spoke that it was already too late.

"Forget it." Marge took another swallow from the bottle at her side. "I don't even have it on me."

There was no time to argue. Nancy ran to the back door. Locked! She tried each of the locked windows, shaking the bars in frustration and fury, but it was no use.

Nancy was a prisoner in her own house, and there was no way to warn Glen that the bogeyman was on his way.

In his dream, Glen thought he heard Nancy call his name. He had a vague notion of getting up and finding out what she wanted, but appearing on the "Tonight" show and meeting Miss Nude America was a much more interesting prospect. He lay back on the sofa in the green room and waited patiently for Johnny Carson to introduce him.

Glen never noticed that the bed had begun to shake or that a foul aroma had begun to permeate the bedroom air. Had he been a lighter sleeper, Glen might have woken up when Freddy's powerful arms first shot up from beneath the covers, grabbed him tight, and pulled him deep into the bed, the stereo and the TV following close behind. Instead, Glen continued to sleep as he clawed desperately at his blanket and sheets, trying with what little strength he had left to keep from being pulled still deeper into the abyss. But his efforts were too feeble and much too late. By the time Glen began to struggle in earnest, the deadly blades of Freddy Krueger had already hacked and sliced their way through half a dozen of his vital organs.

There was a moment of stillness, and then the bed began to bubble and gurgle like some obscene volcano about to erupt. Suddenly, a geyser of blood shot into the air, covering the walls and ceiling as the lifeless remains of Glen Lantz were vomited up from the center of the bed, a sickening mess of guts and brains and bones and shredded flesh streaming over the edge like a river of gore. And then, when there was nothing left of Glen to continue the dream, the pit in the middle of the bed closed up as if it had never been there at all.

Mrs. Lantz walked in a minute later to bring Glen a fresh pillowcase.

Even from across the street, Nancy could hear Mrs. Lantz's anguished scream. Nancy was looking out the window when the ambulance and the police cars arrived. She saw her father climb out of the unmarked car that screeched to a halt in front of Glen's house

and waved to him from behind the bars. He returned the wave quickly and then hurried into the Lantz House. Nancy pulled down the window shade, went downstairs, and dialed Glen's number.

Chapter 9

Lt. Don Thompson was standing in the Lantz living room a few minutes after midnight when the telephone rang.

"It's your daughter, Lieutenant," said Parker. "She says it's urgent." A look of annoyance passed over Thompson's face.

"Tell her I'm not here," he said, watching the coroner head upstairs.

"She saw you a minute ago," said Parker, his hand covering the mouthpiece.

The lieutenant shrugged his broad shoulders and reached for the telephone.

"Hi, honey."

"I know what happened," she said, her voice strangely calm.

"Then you know more than I do. I haven't even been upstairs."

"You know he's dead, though. Right?"

The lieutenant paused a moment and watched one of the uniformed men position a bucket in the middle of the living room floor. He looked up and saw blood dripping through the ceiling.

"Yeah, apparently he's dead. How the hell did you know?"

"Listen carefully," said Nancy, ignoring her father's question. "I've got a proposition for you."

"Go ahead," he said, only half listening as he watched the blood slowly drip into the bucket.

"I'm going to get the guy who did it," said Nancy. "I'm going to get him and bring him to you. All you have to do is be there to arrest him. Okay?"

"You don't have to do anything, baby," said the lieutenant. He wondered if the breakup of his marriage had had anything to do with his daughter's mental collapse. "Just tell me who did it and I'll go get him."

"Fred Krueger did it, Daddy, and I'm the only one who can get him. Just come over here in exactly twenty minutes and break down the door. Can you do that?"

"Sure, but—"

"Half past midnight," said Nancy, glancing at her wrist-watch.
"That should be enough time for me to fall asleep and find him."

"Okay, honey," said Thompson, wondering why in the hell Marge had decided to tell Nancy about Fred Krueger at a time like this. "You just get yourself some sleep, and everything will be all right."

"And you'll be here to catch him, right?"

Before the lieutenant could reply, Parker appeared at the head of the stairs and reminded him that the coroner was waiting.

"Don't worry, honey," he told Nancy, nodding to Parker. "I'll be there. You just get yourself some rest. Deal?"

"Deal," said Nancy.

"I love you, sweetheart." Thompson hung up the phone and began to head up the stairs. Suddenly he stopped and turned to Parker. "Go outside and watch my daughter's house," he said. "If you see anything funny, let me know."

"What do you mean, 'funny'?"

"I don't know," said the lieutenant, suddenly feeling a little foolish. "One thing's for sure: I don't want Nancy coming over here. She's too far gone to be able to handle anything like this."

I wish to God I didn't have to handle it myself, he thought as he quickly climbed the stairs.

Across the street, Nancy was hard at work preparing to do battle. With her survival manual at her side, she began quickly to construct the weapons she would need to fight Freddy Krueger. Her hands were surprisingly steady as she carefully strung piano wire across the living room, filled a light bulb with powder from shotgun shells that Glen had swiped from his father's gun case, and hinged the sledgehammer she had found in the cellar to a trigger mechanism over her bedroom door. Then, when she was finished setting her homemade booby traps, Nancy went upstairs and peeked into her mother's bedroom.

Marge was lying in bed, the half-empty bottle of gin still at her side.

"I guess I shouldn't have done it," she said, looking sadly at Nancy.

"Just sleep now, Mom." Nancy sat at her mother's side and took hold of her hand.

"I just wanted to protect you," said Marge. "I didn't see how much you needed to know. You face things. That's your nature. That's your gift." Marge paused and looked at the bottle at her side. "But sometimes you have to turn away too," she concluded with a shrug of her slender shoulders.

"I love you, Mom," said Nancy.

"I love you, too," said Marge.

Nancy pulled the covers up over her mother's shoulders and tiptoed out of the room. She went into her own room, crawled into bed, and set the alarm on her wristwatch to go off at exactly twelve-thirty.

"Okay, Krueger," she said as she closed her eyes. "We play on your court."

Nancy was rummaging through the old furnace in the cellar. She pulled out the bundle of rags in which her mother had saved Freddy's glove and carefully unwrapped it.

As she expected, the glove was gone.

Nancy looked behind the furnace and noticed a door that she had never seen before. With only a moment's hesitation, she opened the door and began to descend the long staircase. She was startled when the door slammed shut behind her, but she knew that it would ultimately make no difference.

Closed doors have no meaning in the world of dreams.

Then she reached the bottom of the stairs and found herself once more in the vast boiler room. Nancy walked down the narrow passageway, the adrenaline pumping through her system, filling her with a sense of purpose that almost transcended her terror.

"Krueger!" she screamed. "I'm here!"

She continued along a series of treacherous catwalks, carefully avoiding the scalding hot pipes that surrounded her on all sides. It

wasn't time to wake up yet.

She paused a moment to catch her breath and noticed a familiar object.

Tina's crucifix.

She examined the crucifix for a moment and then continued her descent down a seemingly endless procession of ladders that brought her ever closer to the great roaring fire below. She was only a few yards from the fierce orange blaze when she almost stepped on Glen's partially melted headphones.

"Come out and show yourself, you bastard!" she shouted, her voice now indisputably that of the hunter and not the hunted.

And then Freddy showed himself, more hideous than ever before with his head uncovered, his horribly scarred face transformed by the unspeakable hatred he felt for the girl who had dared to challenge his power. Without a moment's hesitation, he lashed out with his razor-sharp finger-knives, but this time Nancy was ready for him. She stepped back into the darkness, strangely confident that no harm could come to her as long as she avoided Freddy's deadly blades.

She was falling now, but the scenery had abruptly changed. She crashed to the ground, no longer in the dank boiler room but on her own front lawn. Nancy scrambled to her feet, knowing that if this had not been a dream every bone in her body would have been crushed by the fall. Breathing the fresh night air, she ran toward the front door, eager to get back to the safety of her own bed.

And then Krueger was behind her, an obscene chuckle of triumph welling up from somewhere deep in his throat. He swiped at Nancy with his blades, certain that she would be unable to open the door before feeling the wrath of his deadly glove. But Nancy attempted neither to open the door nor to flee from her attacker. Instead, she threw herself forward, grasping Freddy around the middle and knocking him over on his back as she deftly avoided his lethal right hand.

Then the alarm went off and Nancy woke up.

Still shaking and breathless, she looked around, almost disappointed not to find the man in the filthy sweater lying beside her in the bed. Of course she was glad to have escaped, but Nancy knew that the nightmares would not end until she finally succeeded in bringing Fred Krueger out of her dream.

Bring him out of my dream? she thought, hearing as if for the first time the absurdity of the idea. "I guess maybe I am crazy after all," she said aloud, remembering her last conversation with Glen.

Then Fred Krueger leaped at her from the side of the bed with an explosive scream of rage.

Nancy rolled off the bed in time to avoid Freddy's claw and darted to the window. Searching desperately for a weapon, she grabbed her coffeepot and brought it crashing down on his head. He was still bellowing with rage as she dashed through the door and threw the outside bolt. Stopping for just a second to attach the string from the sledgehammer to the bedroom doorknob, Nancy raced downstairs and headed for the front door. Locked! She smashed the glass window and began screaming for help.

Upstairs, the enraged madman had already discovered that walking through locked doors was no easy task outside of the world of dreams. His shoulders were strong, however, and it did not take him long to break the feeble latch that held shut Nancy's bedroom door. He threw the door open and stepped boldly out of the room. Instantly, he was struck hard in the chest by the full force of a twenty-pound sledgehammer. Bellowing with pain and anger, Freddy stumbled out into the hallway and tripped over the fishing line Nancy had strung across the top of the staircase. He came crashing down the stairs, sprawling at Nancy's feet as she continued to scream for help through the broken window.

And then Freddy was on his feet again and Nancy was running to the living room, mocking and taunting the furious madman from behind the couch.

"I'm gonna split you in two," Freddy croaked, enraged by Nancy's courage and audacity. He took a step toward her, his finger-knives held high, and tripped over the wire attached to the lamp in which

Nancy had placed the powder-filled light bulb. As Freddie stumbled, the circuit was completed and a loud explosion sent him flying across the room. He lay on the floor, too stunned to move, while Nancy raced back to the front door.

"Help!" she screamed. "I've got him trapped! Daddy, where are you?"

Jerry Parker looked at the girl from across the street and waved reassuringly to her.

"Everything's under control!" he shouted.

"Get my father, you asshole!" Nancy shouted back, her outrage momentarily overtaking her fear. For a moment, she felt as if she had more control over the monstrous Freddy Krueger than she did over the moronic police officer across the street.

Parker looked at the girl and then glanced at the house behind him. The last thing he needed was to have the lieutenant on his case. Better safe than sorry, he thought as he went inside to report that Lieutenant Thompson's daughter was asking for him.

Meanwhile, Freddy was back on his feet and in hot pursuit of the girl who had dared to defy him. Nancy fled to the cellar with Freddy only a few steps behind. Following the plan she had worked out in advance, Nancy hid behind the furnace and waited until Freddy's back was turned. Then she picked up the bottle of gasoline she had left on the steps and called his name.

Freddy turned around, and Nancy doused him with the highly flammable liquid.

"No!" screamed Freddy in horror as Nancy ignited an entire box of kitchen matches and threw the flaming box in his direction. It was too late to duck. Instantly, Freddy was enveloped in flame, screaming in an agony that he had not felt since that horrible day ten years before when he vowed to take his revenge on the people of Springwood.

Nancy reached the top of the cellar stairs and stationed herself behind the door just seconds before the flaming madman started to follow. He was about to pull open the door when Nancy suddenly pushed it forward with all her strength, knocking him down the stairs with a terrible crash. She barely had enough time to throw the

dead bolt on the cellar door before she heard Freddy charging back up the stairs.

She arrived at the front door just as her father stepped out onto Glen's porch across the street.

"Daddy!" she screamed. "I did it! Please hurry!"

Lieutenant Thompson saw the look of urgency on his daughter's face and called to a few of the uniformed patrolmen for help. Together, the men quickly broke down the locked door and rushed into the house. Nancy threw herself into her father's arms as Parker and the others raced toward the smoking cellar.

"What the hell is going on?" asked the lieutenant. Nancy was about to explain when she noticed the trail of flaming footsteps that led from the cellar door, across the living room carpet, and up the front stairs.

"He's after Mother!" Nancy shouted, dashing up the stairs with her father close behind. She arrived at Marge's bedroom to find her mother pinned to the bed by the still flaming Freddy Krueger!

Without a moment's hesitation, Nancy picked up a chair and brought it crashing down over the fiery monster's head. Freddy fell to one side just as the lieutenant entered the room and threw a heavy blanket over the burning bed.

"Watch it!" screamed Nancy. "He's under there!"

Immediately, the lieutenant yanked the top cover off the bed. The fire was out, but the bed continued to glow with an eerie reddish light. In its center lay the charred corpse of Marge Thompson, smoking and seething as it sank slowly into the mattress, its gnarled and blackened hand waving a gruesome farewell.

Then the glow faded, and the hole that had become Marge's eternal grave closed up forever.

"Now do you believe me?" asked Nancy, a strange calm descending on her as she looked her father in the eye. Before the lieutenant could reply, Parker burst in to report that the fire downstairs was under control. Don Thompson looked at his daughter but could find no words to express what he was feeling.

"I'm okay," she said, knowing that the nightmare was rapidly approaching its inevitable end. "You go downstairs. I'll be there in a

minute."

The lieutenant hesitated for a moment and then left the room, closing the door behind him. Nancy turned her back to the bed and waited.

Slowly, the figure of Fred Krueger rose ghostlike from the center of the mattress.

"I know you're there, Freddy," said Nancy, turning to face the charred monster.

"You thought you was going to get away from me?" he croaked, surprised by the calmness of her voice.

"I know you too well now, Freddy," Nancy replied.

Freddy grinned, confident that the chase was over at last.

"And now you die," he said, his gleaming steel talons poised to strike one more time.

But Nancy just looked at him and shook her head.

"It's too late, Krueger. I know the secret now. This is just a dream. You're not alive. It's only a dream." She paused to let her words sink in and then took a deep breath. "I want my mother and my friends again," she said.

"You *what*?" the madman bellowed.

"I take back every bit of energy I ever gave you," said Nancy quietly, turning her back on Fred Krueger for the last time as she walked slowly toward the bedroom door. "You're nothing, Krueger," she said calmly. "You're shit!"

Freddy stepped behind her, his finger-knives bunched together and poised over the back of her neck.

Nancy took another deep breath and reached for the doorknob as the deadly steel talons began to come down.

And then...

Chapter 10

And then it was morning.

Nancy stepped outside into a beautiful new day and squinted at the blinding sunlight.

"God, it's bright," she said, shading her eyes with her hand.

"It's going to burn off soon," said Marge Thompson, stepping out of the house right behind her daughter. "Otherwise it wouldn't be so bright. The sun's just trying hard."

Nancy looked at her mother and smiled. She had a vague sense of something having been wrong the night before, but it was impossible to think about unpleasant things on a magnificent morning like this.

"Feeling better?" Nancy asked.

"I feel like a million bucks," said her mother, and Nancy thought she looked it. "They say you've bottomed out when you can't remember the night before." She paused and slowly nodded her head as if making an important decision. "No more drinking for me, baby. I just don't seem to feel like it anymore." She turned and looked at Nancy. "I kept you up last night, didn't I? You look a little peaked."

"I guess I just slept heavy," said Nancy, vaguely recalling some unpleasant dream that might have disturbed her sleep.

Before she could give the matter any more thought, however, a red convertible with its top down pulled up to the curb in front of the house. Glen Lantz was at the wheel as usual, while Tina Gray and Rod Lane held hands in the backseat.

"You believe this fog?" Glen called out to Nancy's mother as Nancy climbed into the front seat of the convertible.

"I believe anything's possible," said Marge with a cheerful laugh as she waved good-bye to Nancy and her friends.

Glen was about to drive off when the top of the convertible suddenly clamped down like a sprung trap.

"What are you doing?" asked Rod.

"I'm not doing anything," said Glen, and it was true.

It wasn't he who had closed the top.

Or shut all the windows.

Or locked all the doors.

Or painted the weird red and green stripes on the convertible top.

"Mother!" screamed Nancy, but Marge never heard her daughter's screams of terror as the demon automobile drove itself away and disappeared into the fog.

Nancy's mother was still smiling and waving from the doorway when a talon-tipped hand suddenly shattered the glass window behind her, grabbed Marge by the throat, and yanked her back into the house with superhuman strength.

Perhaps it wasn't going to be such a wonderful day on Elm Street after all.

A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET: PART 2: Freddy's Revenge

Chapter 1

Jesse Walsh had only been living in the old house on Elm Street for a few weeks when the nightmares began.

It seemed to Jesse that he was much too happy with his life to be having such spooky dreams. Admittedly, he hadn't been too pleased at first to learn that his father was being transferred to a branch office in the suburbs. Jesse was a city kid and proud of it. After seventeen years learning how to cope with life on the mean urban streets, Jesse wasn't sure he was ready to deal with a bunch of rich kids who had never been into anything heavier than hanging out at the local shopping mall.

Much to his surprise, however, Springwood had turned out to be a pretty nice place to live. Living on a clean and quiet street in a virtually crime-free neighborhood was a refreshing change from life in the big city, and leaving the house each morning with no expectation of being beaten up or robbed on the way to school was something Jesse thought he could very easily learn to live with. Even the kids at school were turning out to be a lot hipper than he had expected. It might take some time, but Jesse knew that he would eventually find his niche in the complex social structure of Springwood High.

In the meantime, of course, there was Lisa Poletti. Whenever things started getting him down, all Jesse had to do was think about Lisa and all his troubles seemed to disappear. The day he met Lisa Poletti, Jesse knew that life in Springwood was going to be just fine after all.

All things considered, Jesse Walsh would have been about as contented as a teenage boy could be if it weren't for those godawful nightmares.

The nightmare he had had that morning was fairly typical. The dream started innocently enough, with Jesse riding the bus home from school. It was a beautiful spring day, and everyone on the bus was glad that another week of school had come to an end. Even Joe the bus driver was in too good a mood to yell at the kid blasting the

radio in the back of the bus. Joe never talked much—except to yell at somebody for breaking one of the rules—but he always seemed like a nice enough old guy, and most of the kids wished him a good weekend as they got off the bus.

By the time the bus reached Jesse's part of town, there was no one left on board except Jesse, the driver, and a couple of giggly girls. Jesse squirmed uncomfortably in his seat as one of the girls looked at him and whispered something to her friend. Then the two girls broke out in uproarious laughter, and Jesse felt his face flush. It suddenly grew very warm on the bus and Jesse tried opening a window. The window refused to budge. He would have tried another window, but he already felt as if he were attracting more than his fair share of attention.

He looked out the window and saw the mother and kid brother of one of the girls waiting at the side of the curb. The girl stood up, waved good-bye to her friend, and walked toward the front of the bus. She was almost at the door when the bus suddenly sped up and shot past the intersection.

"Hey!" shouted the girl. "That was my stop!"

But the bus driver paid no attention.

In fact, the bus seemed to be going even faster now, almost knocking the girl off her feet as it sharply turned the next corner.

"Hey, Joe!" cried the second girl. "Let us off!"

If the driver heard, he made no sign of acknowledgement. Jesse looked out the window and noticed that the weather had undergone a drastic change. The sun that shone so brilliantly just moments ago had completely disappeared. Instead, threatening clouds filled the sky and a wicked wind was whipping the trees into a frenzy.

The bus had passed the last of the houses now and was headed into open terrain at a startling speed. One of the girls had begun to cry as her friend made her way to the front of the bus, struggling to keep her balance as the vehicle hurtled along the bumpy road. The girl was only a few feet from the driver when he stuck out his arm to throw the shift into high gear. She stopped cold when she saw that his sleeve was charred and smoking.

From the back of the bus, Jesse could see the strange glove he wore, its razor-sharp talons gleaming in the darkness.

And then the bus swerved wildly, throwing its passengers onto the floor. Lightning flashed, and the sky had turned black as night. Thick clouds of steam poured out from under the hood of the bus as it crashed wildly through a wall of overgrown brambles on the side of the road. All hell broke loose as the bus hurtled over rocks and through ditches, leaving a trail of toppled trees in its fearsome wake. Skidding wildly across the desert landscape, the bus began to rumble and shake as if the solid earth below were about to explode. Jesse looked out the window just as the front wheel smashed into a jagged boulder and snapped off the axle. He held on for dear life as the smoke-filled bus rocked violently from side to side before bouncing to a bone-shaking halt.

Slowly, Jesse and the two girls lifted themselves up off the floor. The temperature in the smoky bus was well over a hundred degrees, and it was almost impossible to breathe the stifling air. Every door and window was still locked tight.

And then the ground beneath the bus began to split apart as if the planet itself were opening at the seams. Huge chunks of land crumbled inward and toppled to oblivion, leaving the bus to teeter precariously on a narrow stone platform surrounded by nothing but a steamy abyss.

Jesse smelled something burning. He looked to the front of the bus and saw that the dashboard was on fire, thick black clouds of smoke billowing to the ceiling. Then he saw the man who had been driving the bus lurch toward him, and he knew that the creature in the filthy red and green sweater was definitely not Joe the bus driver. Smoke rose from his body as if he himself had recently been on fire, and Jesse thought he saw hot globs of molten flesh dripping off the man's charred skin.

And as the man walked toward the terrified passengers, his finger-knives swept along the seats, leaving deep gashes in the green vinyl upholstery. Jesse knew he would never forget the horrible sound of metal scraping against metal as the horrible blades screeched against the ceiling and the steel support poles.

The three teenagers shared one common desire now, and that desire was to escape from the madman in the dirty sweater. Desperately they raced from window to window, but every window was locked. One of the girls yanked hard on the emergency-door lever and watched helplessly as the lever came loose in her hand.

And then the driver stood before her, his awful taloned glove raised high. Jesse could see the man's horribly scarred face beneath his battered fedora hat, and he knew in that instant that the man wouldn't stop until everyone on the bus was as dead as he was.

There was no way out, and Jesse knew it.

No way out, that is, until his alarm clock went off and he woke up screaming as he had so many mornings before.

"Why can't Jesse wake up like everybody else?" asked his kid sister at the breakfast table that morning. Angela was eleven years old and had never had a nightmare in her life. Having her big brother wake up with a scream of terror every morning was definitely starting to get on her nerves.

"Good morning," Jesse mumbled, joining his family at the breakfast table a few minutes later.

"Good morning, honey." Despite her cheerful greeting, there was an unmistakable look of concern on Shirley Walsh's expressive face. Jesse's mother was the only one in the family besides Jesse himself who seemed to be taking the nightmares seriously. His sister had no idea why her big brother was acting so weird, and his father was of the firmly held belief that the boy was much too old to be making such a big fuss over a couple of bad dreams.

"You got your room straightened out yet?" asked Ken Walsh that morning. Jesse's father was a practical man who believed in practical solutions to life's little problems. He had never been reluctant to express his opinions about anything, and it was his often-expressed opinion that the only thing wrong with Jesse was that he was a lazy kid who had been spoiled all his life by an over-indulgent mother.

"It's getting there," said Jesse in answer to his father's question. It was the same answer he had given to the same question every day for the past month. In point of fact, Jesse's room was still cluttered with half-unpacked boxes of junk that he had to carefully circumnavigate every time he tried weaving his way in or out of the room.

"We've only been living here six weeks now," said his father, pointing at the boy with his fork. "I want that room unpacked by tomorrow night."

Jesse nodded and yawned.

"Would you like some eggs, Jesse?" asked his mother as she slid another panful of scrambled eggs onto her husband's plate. Jesse was about to reply when his mother noticed that Angela had thrust her hand deep into the box of breakfast cereal. "What are you doing, dear?" she asked.

"I'm trying to get the Fu-Man Fingers," the girl replied, spilling Fu-Man Chews all over the kitchen table.

Jesse glanced at the cereal box and saw a cartoon of the evil oriental villain pointing at a bowl of cereal with one of his long, pointed fingernails. Above the cartoon was the caption FREE INSIDE: FU-MAN FINGERS. He gazed at the drawing of a hand wearing several of the long red plastic fingernails and felt himself shudder.

"Jesse?"

He looked away from the cereal box and made a conscious effort to give his mother his full attention.

"Eggs?" she said.

Jesse glanced at the drawing on the cereal box for another second and then shook his head.

"No thanks, Mom," he said, wondering what it was about that picture that made him feel so uneasy. "I'll just have some milk."

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," said Jesse. "Just a little warm, I guess. It's really hot upstairs."

"I know," said his mother, looking pointedly at her husband. "I wish you'd call someone to check out the air conditioning, Ken."

Ken Walsh sat up straight in his chair, a butter knife clenched tightly in his hand as if he were preparing to do battle.

"I know what's wrong with the air conditioning," he insisted. "Just needs a shot of Freon is all."

"Uh-oh," said Jesse, a grin on his face. "Dad's fixing something again. Everybody hit the deck!"

"Don't be a smart ass," said his father. Jesse caught his mother's disapproving look and tried hard not to laugh.

"So," said his mother, eager to change the subject, "is school going all right?"

"Okay, I guess," said Jesse with a shrug.

"Making friends?"

"You know how it is," he replied. Parents always asked how things were going at school, he thought, but you could never talk to them about the things that really mattered.

The doorbell rang just as Angela managed to yank out a bagful of Fu-Man Fingers along with half a box of Fu-Man Chews cereal.

"That's Lisa," said Jesse, jumping out of his seat and grabbing his jacket off the hook near the front door. "I better get going."

"Who's Lisa?" asked his father, but the question went unanswered. Jesse was already out the door.

"Your timing was perfect," Jesse told Lisa as they walked briskly toward his beat-up old Falcon. "I was getting the third degree in there."

"How come?"

"No reason," said Jesse with a shrug. He opened the car door and the girl got in.

Lisa smiled as she watched Jesse walk around to the driver's side of the car. Jesse was different from the other boys in Springwood. Lisa wasn't sure what about him was so special, but there was definitely something about Jesse Walsh that set him apart from any boy she had ever gone out with before. *Not that we're really going out yet*, Lisa reminded herself. Jesse had struck up a conversation with her in the cafeteria last month and found out that she lived on the other end of Elm Street. He offered her a ride to school the next morning, and they had been traveling together ever since. It was true

that he hadn't asked her out yet, but Lisa knew it was just a matter of time. There was something about this new boy that she really liked, and she was pretty sure that the feeling was mutual.

As much as Lisa liked Jesse, however, she had to admit that his Falcon was not the most elegant automobile she had ever ridden in. As a matter of fact, she had never seen such a battered and makeshift car before in her whole life. The body of the car was almost as much rust as metal, and the stuffing that stuck up through the front seat inside was barely held in by the cheap tape that covered most of the ripped-up vinyl upholstery. The dashboard was cracked and peeling, with gaping holes where the radio and the glove compartment used to be. In lieu of state-of-the-art stereo equipment, a cheap AM transistor radio was hung by its wrist strap like a good-luck charm from the rearview mirror.

Lisa was beginning to love the old heap almost as much as Jesse did.

Jesse climbed into the driver's seat. He pulled a couple of bare wires out from under the dash and twisted them together.

"Aren't you afraid somebody could steal your car like that?" asked Lisa.

"Are you kidding?" said Jesse, turning to the girl with a big smile on his face. "*This* car?"

He flicked on a toggle switch that stuck out through a crudely drilled hole in the dash and then pushed the button next to it. Slowly, the starter began to turn over.

"Contact," said Jesse, giving a thumbs-up signal. The engine loudly backfired and then roared to life. He threw the wobbly gearshift into first and stepped on the accelerator as the car began slowly to buck and rumble its way up the street.

Jesse glanced at Lisa Poletti and broke into a grin. Bad dreams or no bad dreams, life in Springwood was looking very good indeed.

Ken Walsh was also feeling very pleased with life in the suburbs that morning. Floating on a foam chair in the middle of his small

backyard pool, he sipped his coffee and took a deep breath of the fresh morning air.

"Ken," said his wife, stepping out the back door and glancing at her wristwatch, "shouldn't you be getting to the office? It's almost nine o'clock."

"As soon as I finish my coffee," he said. "I'm enjoying my pool right now." He paused and took a sip of his wife's excellent coffee. "I love our new house. Don't you?"

"Of course I do," she said, but the look on her face told him that something wasn't quite right.

"What's the problem, Shirl?"

"I'll just be a lot happier when you finish taking down those bars," she said.

Ken looked at the old house and nodded. It was hard to imagine why anyone would put heavy iron bars on every window and door in this lovely old house on Elm Street.

Chapter 2

Lisa was glad she had phys ed the same time as Jesse.

Not that she liked the class or her teacher. Lisa did not happen to share Mrs. Dorfman's archaic notion that archery was an essential element of every girl's physical education. Standing outside in her goofy gym suit and shooting arrows at some dumb target was not Lisa's idea of a good time, but at least it gave her the opportunity to watch Jesse and the other boys play softball at the other end of the athletic field. Lisa knew that Jesse really enjoyed softball and looked forward to gym each day, but she liked to think that their friendly exchange of smiles and waves during seventh period every day meant almost as much to him as throwing that big ball around and sliding in the mud.

"He make any moves yet?"

Lisa turned to the girl standing next to her and shrugged. "I've only known him a few weeks," she told her friend Kerry. Sometimes it was hard to believe that she and Jesse had only met a month ago. As she looked at him now—standing at second base and staring intently at the batter—she couldn't help feeling as if she had known the boy her whole life.

"Personally," said Kerry, "I think that boy needs a push start." Lisa laughed. She knew that Kerry had gone pretty far pretty fast with a lot of boys, but that just wasn't Lisa's style. Lisa was glad that Jesse wasn't pushing for anything more physical yet. They were still getting to know each other, and for now it was kind of nice just having him as a good friend. Lisa wondered why things always seemed to get so complicated once you started treating a boy as something more than a friend.

Lisa had just slipped an arrow into her bow when she heard the crack of a ball against a bat on the other side of the field. She glanced over to home plate and saw that Ron Grady had just sent the ball flying over the pitcher's head toward second base. She looked over to where Jesse stood and saw that he had chosen that inopportune moment to smile at her and wave.

"Jesse!" she cried, but it was too late. The ball grazed him on the side of the head, and Jesse tumbled to the ground.

Immediately, Jesse's teammates were at his side and helping him to his feet. He waved them away, more embarrassed than hurt, and glanced over at Lisa to see if she had witnessed his fall. The girl smiled at him and shrugged.

"You okay?" asked Coach Schneider, jogging over from his umpire's position behind home plate.

"I'm fine," said Jesse. Schneider was an ex-Marine and a real hard character. Jesse had decided from the very beginning to do everything he could to stay on Coach Schneider's good side.

Assuming, of course, that Coach Schneider had a good side.

"Well, pay attention next time!" shouted the coach, jogging back across the diamond.

Jesse resumed his position at second base and found himself looking into the sneering face of Ron Grady.

"Maybe you ought to try something a little more your speed, Walsh," said Grady, taking a few steps toward third base. "Like knitting."

"Knit this, Grady." Jesse stuck out his tongue and gave Grady a particularly juicy Bronx cheer.

Grady responded by grabbing his own crotch and making the appropriate obscene gesture. Jesse replied with an Italian salute, slapping one hand into the crook of his arm and throwing up his middle finger for good measure. Grady was about to return the compliment when his teammate slammed a line drive into left field. Grady broke for third, but was greeted by the third baseman, who now held the ball in his mitt. Grady turned and headed back for second just as the ball snapped into Jesse's outstretched glove. He turned again, running back and forth like a rat in a trap as Jesse and the third baseman slowly moved in on their prey. In a desperate attempt to get past Jesse, Grady suddenly slid headfirst into second base, but his attempt proved futile. With a grin of triumph, Jesse swooped down and tagged the runner out.

The sportsmanlike thing for Grady to have done at that point would have been to rise to his feet and trot quickly back to the bench,

but sportsmanship had never been Ron Grady's strong suit. Instead, he pulled himself to his feet by grabbing onto Jesse's gym shorts and yanking them down to his ankles. Jesse looked down and saw himself exposed to the world in his slightly frayed jockstrap. Under different circumstances, he might have laughed it off as a prank and planned to take appropriate revenge on Grady at some future date. Knowing that Lisa and her classmates had witnessed the stunt, however, Jesse was furious. He lunged at Grady, tripping over his own shorts as he threw the larger boy to the ground and started trading punches with him.

"Cute ass," said Kerry from the archery range. Lisa smiled and nodded her head.

The fight did not last long. Coach Schneider quickly broke through the crowd of cheering boys to grab Jesse and Grady by their necks.

"Assume the position, boys," said the ex-Marine, and Jesse knew then and there that fighting in Coach Schneider's class had been a serious mistake.

An hour later, Jesse and Grady were still side by side in the center of the baseball diamond. Only now they were in the front-leaning rest position, their elbows slightly bent and their arms aching as each boy held himself up in a painful frozen push-up.

"How much longer you figure he'll keep us here?" asked Jesse, his muscles twitching and his teeth clenched in pain.

"Could be all night," said Grady, gasping for breath. "Guy gets his rocks off like this. I hear he hangs out in queer S and M joints downtown. Likes pretty boys like you."

"Get outta here," said Jesse. He had met a lot of loudmouths like Grady over the years, and he knew that most of them just talked to hear the sound of their own voices. Still, you never knew when one of them was telling you the truth.

But Grady was tired of talking about the coach.

"So what about you and that Poletti girl?" he asked after a silence that seemed to last for hours.

"What about it?"

"You two got a thing going, or what?"

"She's a neighbor," Jesse said a little too quickly. He didn't like talking about Lisa to a guy like Grady. "I drive her to school."

"She giving you any carfare for the ride?" Grady asked, a smirk on his face. Under different circumstances, Jesse might have answered with his fists.

"You got a problem with me, Grady?" He sincerely hoped that he wasn't going to have Grady on his case for the rest of the semester.

"Nah," said the other boy, looking somewhat surprised by Jesse's question. "Just killing time."

Then the whistle blew, and Coach Schneider appeared in his street clothes.

"Okay, boys," he said, already crossing the field in the direction of the faculty parking lot. "Hit the showers."

Both boys collapsed on the ground, their arms and shoulders screaming with relief. They lay there for a long time before getting up slowly like two very arthritic old men. Then, their arms dangling loosely at their sides, the two boys staggered toward the locker room.

If the coach's intention had been to bring the boys closer together, the severity of his punishment was not without some justification. By the time Jesse and Grady finished their showers, they were bonded together forever by a common hatred for Coach Schneider and his extreme methods of exacting discipline from his students.

"So," said Grady as he slipped into his shirt, "you live around here?"

"Not too far," said Jesse. "My folks bought a place over on Elm Street."

Grady stopped buttoning his shirt and looked up.

"Elm Street?" he echoed. "You telling me you moved into that big white house with the bars on the windows?"

"Yeah. Why?"

Grady grinned and shook his head slowly from side to side.

"Shit," he said. "You can tell your old man he's a real chump."

"What the hell are you talking about?" asked Jesse, his temper flaring once again.

"They've only been trying to unload that dump for five years," said Grady. "Some chick was locked in there by her mother and she went

crazy. Seems she watched her boyfriend get butchered by some maniac in the house across the street. They say her poor drunken momma killed herself right inside your front door."

Jesse stared at Grady and tried to decide how much of the story he was making up.

"You're full of shit," he said at last, slamming his locker shut and walking away.

Still, he couldn't help wondering about those weird bars...

Jesse reached the parking lot only to find Lisa Poletti leaning against the Falcon's front fender.

"You didn't have to wait," he said, although he was very glad that she did.

"That's okay." Lisa smiled and shrugged her shoulders. "I wanted to."

Jesse returned the girl's smile and opened the car door. For a moment, he considered kissing her on her pretty mouth and telling her how glad he was to see her. Instead, he slid into the car and started the engine.

"Are you okay?" she asked. Jesse looked at himself in the rearview mirror and shrugged.

"I'm fine," he said, knowing that he didn't look it. An ugly bruise had appeared over his right eye where Grady's fist had landed during their brief scuffle.

"Let me look at that eye," said Lisa. Jesse tilted his head back, suddenly feeling vaguely proud of his injury. "You really shouldn't be fighting with that jerk."

"Grady?" he said, a little surprised by the intensity of Lisa's concern. "Grady's all right. He's just a hothead."

"You mean a shithead," said Lisa.

"Right," said Jesse.

But even a shithead can be right sometimes, he thought as he gunned the engine and headed for home.

Chapter 3

Jesse lay in bed, his eyes wide open and his brain working overtime.

Not that there was really all that much to think about. Sure, there was Lisa and Grady and school and the coach and the nightmares and a dozen other things that had been on Jesse's mind all day, but there was really nothing Jesse had to think about that couldn't wait until morning. Still, Jesse found himself lying awake, thinking about all those things at once, and there didn't seem to be anything he could do to stop.

Jesse had never had trouble sleeping before. In the past, just thinking about going to bed was almost enough to put him out. Now, whatever switch in his brain that was supposed to turn off at night seemed to be permanently stuck in the on position. Jesse turned from one side to the other, fluffed his pillow, and even tried sleeping with his feet propped up on the headboard, but nothing seemed to work. Jesse felt more wide awake than he had all day.

Maybe it's the damned heat, he thought, throwing his cover on the floor and sitting up. The problem with the air conditioning was really starting to get seriously out of hand. The temperature in the house must have been at least twenty degrees higher than the temperature outside.

And Jesse's room was the hottest of all.

Jesse pulled on a pair of pants and walked down to the kitchen. He remembered reading in a magazine about how milk had some kind of enzyme or something in it that helped you sleep. Jesse figured it was probably bullshit, like most of the stuff in those magazines, but he didn't see how it could hurt to try. Besides, he had to do something besides lie in bed and stare at the ceiling all night.

It was dark in the kitchen, but Jesse wasn't quite ready to face the blinding glare of the overhead light. Guided by the moonlight that shone faintly through the window, he found his way to the refrigerator, the linoleum cold beneath his bare feet.

Now, the last thing anyone expects when opening the refrigerator door in the middle of the night is for something to jump out at him and land at his feet with a resounding crash.

Which is why Jesse almost had heart failure when the bottle of apple juice flung itself out of the refrigerator and shattered on the kitchen floor.

Take it easy, Walsh, he told himself, quickly regaining his composure. He glanced out into the hall, hoping that the noise hadn't disturbed anyone upstairs. He was in no mood to have his father come downstairs and bawl him out for breaking the apple juice bottle in the middle of the night.

Especially when he never even touched the damned bottle.

Jesse crossed the room and unrolled an absurd length of paper toweling from the roll over the sink. *All I need now is a handful of broken glass*, he thought, tearing off an extra half-dozen sheets for good measure.

He had just finished cleaning up when he saw the grotesque face in the kitchen window.

"Shit," he whispered, turning his head away for just a moment. When he looked back, the face was gone.

One thing worse than having something jump out of your refrigerator in the middle of the night is to see a grotesque face leering in at you through your kitchen window—and one thing worse than that is having the face disappear a second later.

Jesse figured he had two choices.

He could assume that his eyes were playing tricks on him and just go back to bed.

Or he could go outside and find out who or what was staring into his kitchen window in the middle of the night.

Taking a deep breath to quiet his pounding heart, Jesse reluctantly chose the second course of action. His palms sweating, he opened the back door and stepped outside.

Silence. Not even a cricket chirped to disturb the absolute quiet of the night. Jesse opened the gate and checked out the side of the house. He thought he saw something move in the shrubbery.

Suddenly he had an idea of who the intruder might be.

"Grady?" he whispered loudly, taking one cautious step closer to the shrubbery. "It better be you, you son of a bitch!"

Jesse was about to pounce on the bush when he heard the sound of ripping wood.

Quickly, Jesse moved to the side of the house and saw the flickering orange light emanating from the cellar window. He got down on his hands and knees and peered inside.

The man in the cellar was definitely not Ron Grady.

Grady didn't wear a filthy red and green striped sweater and a battered fedora hat.

And Grady would definitely not put his hand into a raging furnace.

"Holy shit!" said Jesse as the man pulled a bundle of rags out of the furnace and began to unwrap them.

"Holy shit!" he said again, unable to think of anything more original to say under the circumstances. He raced back through the gate and into the house, heading directly for the cellar door.

The door was wide open, the wooden frame around the lock splintered as if by some huge wrecking bar. Jesse peeked inside, almost deafened by the roar of the furnace. Then he saw the intruder's eerie shadow on the cellar walls and he knew for sure that this was a problem he didn't want to handle by himself.

"Dad!" he screamed, slamming the cellar door closed and throwing all his weight against it.

"Dad!" he screamed again as something inside began pounding against the door, a force far stronger than Jesse slowly inching it open.

Jesse let go and bolted toward the foyer, but there was no escape.

The man in the dirty sweater was blocking the way, an evil smile on his scarred face.

"Daddy can't help you now," he croaked, flashing his steel blades in Jesse's face.

Jesse turned to run, but the man with the finger-knives had already grabbed him with a viselike grip and lifted him several inches off the floor.

"I've been waiting five years for you, Jesse," he said, his talons touching the boy's cheek almost like the gentle fingers of a lover. "We

got special work to do, you and me. Things are really going to heat up now."

Jesse struggled to get free, but it was no use. He turned his face to the side, as disgusted by the madman's foul breath as he was terrified of his razor-sharp blades.

"We'll do real good together, you and me," the man said before suddenly hurling Jesse against the wall. He grinned, exposing a mouthful of crooked yellow teeth. "You got the body," he said, raising his left hand to the brim of his hat, "I got the brains."

He took off his hat, and Jesse saw that the top of his skull was completely gone. Beneath the hat was a bloody, pulsating mass of exposed brain matter.

Jesse began to scream, and he was still screaming when his mother and father came running into the bedroom to wake him up.

"Maybe we should call a doctor," said his mother, holding the boy in her arms as he sat up in bed, trembling and drenched in sweat.

"I'm okay," said Jesse. He shook his head violently from side to side in a struggle to regain full consciousness. "It was just a bad dream."

Just a bad dream, he repeated to himself, wanting desperately to believe it.

Chapter 4

If Jesse had found it hard to fall asleep that night, he was finding it even more difficult to stay awake the following afternoon.

Even under the best of circumstances, Mr. Able was not the sort of biology teacher who inspired students to dissect their frogs with unbounded enthusiasm or run to their guidance counselors to investigate careers in the biological sciences. More often, students who entered Mr. Able's class with a burning interest in biology ended the semester by vowing never to take another science course for the rest of their natural lives.

The subject of today's lecture was the digestive system, and Jesse was finding it more difficult with every passing moment to keep his eyes open. He had not enjoyed an unbroken night's sleep for weeks, and the sound of Mr. Able's droning voice was proving to be just the sort of bland background noise that Jesse needed to lull himself to sleep.

"To review," said Mr. Able, reading as always from the same notes he had been reading to students since landing his first teaching job many years ago, "the solid waste, those nutrients that are not absorbed in the lining of the stomach, the large intestine, or the small intestine—that is, the alimentary canal—are passed out through the colon—"

Someone in the back of the room did an excellent impression of gas passing loudly through the human colon. Mr. Able looked up and waited for the laughter to subside.

"The liquid nutrients," he continued, untroubled by his students' complete lack of interest, "are then carried through an elaborate system of filtering, aided by the pancreas, liver, and gallbladder."

Jesse sat with his chin in his hand, his eyelids at half-mast as the teacher droned on and on. He was not aware that Ron Grady was watching him from across the room.

"... or collected in the bladder to be expelled at a later time," Mr. Able continued. "And this entire process is kept moving through the circulatory system, the center of which is the heart."

Mr. Able paused dramatically, reached under his lab table, and plunked down the bloody heart of a calf.

"Gross!" cried a girl in the front row, and she was clearly not alone in her opinion. Mr. Able treated the class to one of his rare smiles. This was his favorite part of the semester.

Except, of course, for the day they dissected the fetal pig. Someone almost always passed out before that day was done.

"Four chambers," he explained, using his index finger as a pointer, slipping it into each bloody chamber with great enthusiasm. "Just like the human heart. From the body, through the right auricle, to the right ventricle, and out the pulmonary artery to the lungs."

At that moment, Jesse was the only student in the room who was not completely grossed out by the teacher's revolting demonstration, and that was only because the boy was fast asleep.

Which was also the reason that he was unaware of the slithery serpent that had wrapped itself around his arm and was slowly making its way toward his face.

It was not until the snake hissed and tickled his arm with its long forked tongue that Jesse opened his eyes and screamed, scrambling out of his seat while prying the reptile off his arm.

In an instant, Mr. Able was at the boy's side. He plucked the snake expertly off Jesse's arm and dropped it into the nearby tank from which someone had quietly removed it.

"If you want to play with animals, Mr. Walsh," said the teacher, "may I suggest you join the circus."

Jesse felt himself flush with embarrassment as the class broke out in laughter and applause.

He looked around and saw Ron Grady grinning at him from his seat next to the reptile tank.

Jesse had all but forgotten the incident in biology by the time seventh period rolled around. Tonight he was going to be with Lisa, and nothing a jerk like Grady could do was going to put a permanent damper on his high spirits.

It was unbearably warm in Jesse's room as he pulled his pants on over his bathing suit, but Jesse barely noticed the heat. Tonight promised to be the night that he and Lisa finally became more than just good friends.

Jesse had been trying to work up the courage to ask her out all week, but somehow the time just never seemed right. He had planned to make his move at the big pool party Lisa was throwing at the end of the week and hoped he wouldn't lose his nerve when the right moment presented itself. Fortunately, Lisa had taken the matter into her own hands. When he mentioned that he was looking forward to the party, Lisa asked him if he wanted to come over tonight for a sneak preview.

The invitation was rife with possibilities.

Unfortunately, his father had different plans for Jesse that evening.

"Where do you think you're going?" asked Ken Walsh as his son bounced merrily down the stairs with a rolled towel under his arm.

"Just out for a while," said Jesse. He wasn't ready to tell his father about Lisa Poletti just yet.

"Didn't I tell you I want that room unpacked tonight?" asked his father, shouting to make himself heard over "Six o'clock News."

"Come on, Dad," said Jesse, looking at his mother for sympathy and support.

"Upstairs," ordered his father. Jesse's mother was about to speak when her husband fixed her with a withering gaze. "Now," he said, and the boy knew there was no use arguing. Cursing in a voice too low to be heard, he turned around and stomped back up the stairs.

A minute later, a telephone rang at the Poletti house on the other end of Elm Street.

"There's a Jesse on the phone," Mrs. Poletti informed her daughter, sticking her head out through the sliding glass doors that led to the pool.

"Thanks, Mom." Lisa hoisted herself out of the pool, threw a towel around her shoulders, and picked up the wireless phone on the poolside table.

"Jesse, hi... Oh, that's okay. I'm sorry you can't make it... No, I understand. Parents can be real pains. I'll see you in the morning, okay?"

Jesse hung up the phone and threw himself down on the bed. So he wouldn't go swimming with Lisa tonight. Big deal! He'd have plenty of time to be alone with her at the party. Besides, he was still going to see her in the morning, and that was certainly something to feel good about.

Having convinced himself that the world was not coming to an end, Jesse sat up and surveyed the room that he was now obliged to put into some semblance of order. It was clearly going to be no easy task.

Jesse had decided long ago that no unpleasant chore should ever be undertaken until the proper musical accompaniment had been chosen. He pulled a shoe box out of one of the many open cartons surrounding the bed and rifled through his collection of cassettes. He picked out one of the tapes, popped it into his cassette player, and turned up the volume.

Jesse wondered how anyone ever got anything done before the invention of rock 'n' roll. There was something about the pounding of the drums and the driving rhythm of the guitars that never failed to make his feet start to move and his heart start to pump just a little bit faster. Tired though he was, Jesse was on his feet now, shuffling along in time to the music as he started randomly dumping the contents of cartons directly into his bureau drawers. Humming along with the music, he pulled a pair of wraparound sunglasses out of a box and put them on. He danced across the room and found his Stetson, pulling the big old cowboy hat down low over his eyes. There was a searing lead guitar solo on the tape now, and Jesse danced over to the mirror, miming a brilliant air-guitar riff.

Looking good! he told himself, swinging over to the desk in time to the driving beat of the music. He picked up a box of pencils and assorted school supplies and dumped them unceremoniously into the desk drawer just as the drum solo began. Jesse snatched up a pair of unsharpened pencils and laid down some flawless paradiddles on the edge of the desk. Delighted by his own spectacular aptitude as

a drummer, Jesse shoved the two pencils up his nostrils, tucked his thumbs under his armpits, and began flapping his elbows joyously in time to the music.

"Jesse's funky chicken," he said out loud, spinning around in a perfect imitation of James Brown, the Godfather of Soul, at his absolute funkiest.

He had just completed his spin when he saw Lisa and his mother standing in the doorway.

Jesse's mother was knocking timidly on the open door as Jesse yanked the pencils out of his nose and turned off the tape player. He glanced at himself in the mirror and pulled off the sunglasses and Stetson hat.

"Hi," he said, trying very hard to sound as if he had not just been caught acting like a total fool.

"Hi," said Lisa. Jesse looked pointedly at his mother. The woman sighed deeply and went downstairs.

"I told your mom you invited me over," said Lisa, staring with wide eyes at Jesse's pigsty of a room as she stepped inside. "I guess I should have called first."

"No, that's okay," said Jesse as he threw the pencils into the desk drawer. "I was just unpacking."

"I know." Lisa glanced casually into one of the many open cartons on the floor. "I figured you might like some help."

"Yeah?"

Lisa shrugged her shoulders and smiled.

"What are friends for?" she asked, pushing back her sleeves as she started to unload the largest carton in the room.

After half an hour of unpacking, Jesse thought that his room looked almost like one of those flawless teenage rooms that he had seen on reruns of old TV sitcoms. In fact, although the room was still very far from what Jesse's father would consider to be straightened up, Jesse and Lisa had undeniably taken a few major steps in the right direction.

Jesse was busy positioning his baseball trophy in a conspicuous spot on the corner of his dresser when Lisa pulled an aerosol can of jock-itch spray out of a carton.

"Where does this go?" she asked, a mischievous smile on her face.

His face reddening slightly, Jesse grabbed the can away from her and stashed it out of sight behind his trophy. He looked around for some more suitable unpacking for the girl to do.

"There's a box of sweaters over there if you want to put them away," he said. Lisa nodded and dragged the box closer to the closet. She grabbed a handful of sweaters, folded them neatly, and then stepped up onto a chair to stack them on the upper shelf. She was about to step down when she noticed a small leather-bound book in the back corner of the shelf.

"What's this?" she asked, handing the small red book to Jesse.

"Looks like a diary." He casually fingered the leather strap that snapped into a small metal latch on the front.

Lisa took the book back and sat down on Jesse's desk chair. She glanced at the boy for a moment and then opened the latch. When Jesse didn't object, she opened the book and began to read out loud.

"Nancy Thompson, 323 Elm Street... Hey, this thing is five years old!"

Jesse stepped forward and looked over Lisa's shoulder.

"You know her?" he asked.

"Before my time," said Lisa with a shake of her head. "I just moved here three years ago myself."

Lisa flipped a few pages and resumed reading.

"February 17: My birthday. Daddy came by today with a big old stuffed bear for me. He took me to dinner and a movie. When we got back, he and mother had another one of their fights. He left angry. I wish they would stop fighting..."

Jesse went back to unpacking, clearly uninterested in the problems of some girl who lived here five years ago.

"I think it's sad," said Lisa, continuing to leaf through the pages of the diary.

"Traumas of a ten-year-old," said Jesse, wondering to himself why girls were so fascinated by that sort of thing.

"March 7," Lisa read, her voice slightly louder now as if to command Jesse's attention. "Glen asked me to sleep with him again." Jesse stopped what he was doing and started paying attention. "I

can't yet," the diary continued. "I like him and I want to make him happy, but I'm not sure that I love him. I can't sleep with someone I don't love."

"That's typical," said Jesse, suddenly extremely conscious that he was alone with Lisa in his bedroom. "I hope she didn't expect to make the best-seller list with this thing."

Lisa ignored him and continued scanning the pages.

"Listen to this!" she said. "Sometimes, when I'm lying here in bed, I can see Glen across the way getting ready for bed. His body is slim and smooth. I know I shouldn't watch, but that part of me that wants him forces me to. That's when I weaken. That's when I want to go to him."

Jesse strode quickly across the room and took the book from Lisa. He reread the passage and then turned the page with a disappointed look on his face.

"That's it?" he said, flipping through the pages. "Wait, she skipped a week." He looked at Lisa for a moment and then read out loud. "March 15: He comes to me at night. Horrible. Ugly. Dirty. Under the sheets with me, tearing at my nightgown with his steel claw." Jesse paused. There was something about the steel claw... "He keeps taking me to the boiler room. He wants to kill me." Jesse turned the page, and suddenly his hands began to tremble.

"What is it?" asked Lisa. Jesse handed her the book. There was one sentence scrawled across the page.

Tina is dead.

Jesse took the book back and read the next page aloud.

"Rod's been killed. He got Rod. There's just Glen and me now. Mustn't fall asleep."

"Are you okay?" asked Lisa, alarmed as much by the expression on Jesse's face as by the weird diary entries.

"It's just something Grady told me today," said Jesse. "About the people that lived here before. He said the girl went crazy after she saw her boyfriend get killed across the street."

Lisa was about to tell him what she thought about Ron Grady and his stupid stories when Jesse's mother walked in.

"How's it going?" she asked cheerfully.

"Okay," said Jesse, hiding the diary behind his back. He wasn't quite ready to talk to his mother about the strange book or about Grady's spooky story.

"Looks great!" said his mother, smiling as she surveyed the room. "I thought you kids might like to take a break. I've got some cold cider downstairs."

Lisa glanced at Jesse's alarm clock and shook her head.

"Thanks," she said, "but I'd better be going. I've got a major paper due the end of this week."

"Let me know if you change your mind," said Jesse's mother before leaving the room. There was something about this girl that she really liked.

Jesse waited until his mother was gone before turning back to Lisa.

"You sure you have to go?" he asked.

"Afraid so," she replied. "World history. But I'll see you in the morning, right?"

Jesse smiled and nodded his head.

"Let me know how that thing turns out," said Lisa, pointing to the diary.

Jesse looked down at the book that he still clenched tightly in his hand.

His fingers had left a deep indentation in the diary's soft leather binding.

Chapter 5

"Kind of warm in here, isn't it?"

Jesse's mother had just finished covering the parakeet cage as she did every evening around that time. She didn't like to complain, but she had never seen birds sweat before.

Ken Walsh glared at his wife and wiped the perspiration off his forehead. She had been after him for the past several days to do something about the air conditioning, and now it was unbearably warm in the house. Ken hated to be proved wrong about anything, especially in front of Angela and Jesse, but he had to admit to himself that he had waited a little too long to put in the damned Freon. He climbed out of his recliner and walked over to the thermostat near the kitchen door.

"It's ninety-seven degrees in here!" He immediately pulled the cover plate off the thermostat and began fiddling with the coil. He wasn't exactly sure what he was doing, but Ken Walsh was a man who believed that it was always better to be doing something than not to be doing anything at all.

Jesse was aware of the intense heat the moment he walked in the room. It was warm throughout the house, but the heat was especially oppressive in the living room that evening. He was about to ask his father when he planned to do something about the air conditioning when Angela raised an index finger to her lips.

"Shhh!" she said. "The birds are sleeping."

Jesse never cared much for Mr. Blue and Mr. Green, and Angela knew it. She had been the one who wanted parakeets in the first place, and she had been the one to come up with their ridiculous names. Jesse used to tease her by insisting that the blue parakeet was actually Mr. Green and vice versa, but they both quickly tired of that game. Now, Jesse generally just ignored the creatures altogether. They were quiet birds who required nothing more in the way of daily care than a little birdseed, some fresh water, and a clean layer of newspaper on the bottom of their cage. Mr. Blue and Mr. Green were the kind of pets it was easy to ignore.

At least, until that night.

The first terrifying squawk that came from within the covered cage sounded as if it were filtered through a guitar amplifier that someone had accidentally turned up all the way. Jesse rushed to the cage and tore away the cover.

Mr. Blue had pierced Mr. Green's neck with his sharp beak and was proceeding to rip the green bird to shreds with his claws.

Without thinking, Jesse opened the cage and reached inside to separate the attacking bird from his victim. Mr. Blue immediately turned his attention to the intruding hand, drawing blood from Jesse's wrist before flying out into the living room. Angela screamed as the bird circled over her head sounding a loud war cry that seemed more appropriate for an eagle than a parakeet. Suddenly the bird swooped down, diving directly at Jesse's father. Ken Walsh screamed in pain as Mr. Blue cut a bloody gash just below his left eye.

"Get a broom or something!" he yelled as the bird crashed into a lamp and sent it crashing to the floor.

Maybe it was just the excitement of the moment, but Jesse would have sworn that the parakeet had somehow grown to the size of a small pigeon hawk.

The bird was hovering around the light fixture now, its beak and most of its head covered with blood. Jesse's mother had handed her husband a broom, and he began swatting wildly at the fast-moving bird. Suddenly, Mr. Blue let out a terrifying scream and dove for Jesse's head. Jesse ducked just before his father swung the broom, knocking over the other lamp as the bird soared back toward the ceiling. It seemed to be puffing up even larger now, and a low growl issued from its throat. Angela wrapped herself tightly around her mother's leg and whimpered in terror as the demonic bird looked around to select its next victim.

Then there was a loud explosion, and Mr. Blue burst into flames in midair.

Angela was still crying hysterically as her father dashed into the kitchen with a screwdriver and a pipe wrench in his hands. Jesse watched as the man threw his full weight against the gas range and tried to pull the heavy appliance away from the wall.

"Help me with this thing," he said, glaring angrily at Jesse.

"It's not the gas, Dad," said Jesse as calmly as possible under the circumstances.

"Don't tell me it's not the gas," said his father, beads of perspiration dripping into the bloody gash below his eye. "Your mother thought she smelled gas."

"I wasn't sure, Ken," said Jesse's mother timidly.

"All right, then," he said, banging a fist on the range. "What is it? Bird rabies? That cheap seed you've been buying? There's got to be an explanation. Animals don't just burst into flames for no reason!"

"Well, it sure isn't leaky gas pipes," said Jesse. He hated it when his father acted so irrationally. Why did he always think there was an easy answer to every problem?

Ken Walsh straightened his back and cracked his head on the edge of the range hood. Clutching his head with one hand and groaning in pain, he whirled around and pointed an accusing finger at Jesse.

"You set this whole thing up, didn't you?" he said, a gleam of sudden revelation in his eye. "This is one of your sick jokes, isn't it?"

"Oh, Ken!" said his wife in disgust.

"You know what I'm talking about." He lifted his wrench to shoulder level and took a step closer to Jesse. "What did you use, a firecracker? Some kind of cherry bomb?"

Jesse shook his head, refusing to believe that his father could even think of accusing him of such a thing.

"I don't have to listen to this," he said, storming angrily out of the kitchen.

"Come back here!" yelled his father, but Jesse was already halfway up the stairs. Ken Walsh stared blankly at the pipe wrench in his trembling hand before turning to his sated wife. "I don't know, Shirl," he said, taking her in his arms. "He used to be such a good kid."

Sleep came easily to Jesse the night Mr. Blue exploded.

Between parakeets bursting into flame and the incredible stuff he had been reading in Nancy Thompson's diary, Jesse figured that going to sleep was the only sensible thing to do if he wanted to hold onto his sanity until morning.

If I think about all this stuff tonight, I'll go nuts, he thought as he climbed into bed and turned off the light. Jesse pulled the cover up over his head and closed his eyes, confident that things would begin to make more sense after a good night's sleep.

It was a good plan, but it didn't work out exactly the way he had hoped.

Shortly after two o'clock in the morning, Jesse emerged from his room and stepped lightly past his parents' bedroom. He went downstairs into the dark foyer and paused for a long moment at the cellar door.

There was something Jesse had to do, but he knew that doing it was going to change his life forever.

Jesse wasn't sure he wanted his life to change.

Not now.

And certainly not like that.

"Do it," he whispered aloud, reviving his rapidly failing courage. He took a deep breath, opened the door, and turned on the light. Slowly he climbed down the stairs and approached the furnace. He squatted down, reached past the firebox door, and pulled out a heavy object wrapped in a bundle of dirty old rags.

It was the old leather glove fitted with rusty knife blades that the intruder had discovered in Jesse's dream.

And then the furnace switched on with a deafening roar and flames filled the iron firebox.

"Hot enough for you?"

Jesse whirled around and saw the man in the red and green sweater leaning up against the cellar wall.

"Go ahead, Jesse," the man croaked, nodding his head at the obscene object in Jesse's hand. "Try it on for size."

Jesse looked at the glove and saw that the dull and rusty blades were now razor-sharp and gleaming in the dim light.

"What do you want?" Jesse demanded, instantly dropping the glove on the cellar floor. The man in the dirty sweater looked down at the gleaming blades and then turned his hateful gaze on Jesse for just a fraction of a second. Then his eyes softened again and his mouth twisted into the vague semblance of a smile.

"I need you to finish my work," he said. "Let me teach you, Jesse. We'll have fun. You like my little trick with the bird?"

Jesse stepped behind a stack of cartons as the man slowly moved toward him.

"Kill for me," he whispered, his voice almost seductive now as he stepped closer to the terrified boy. "Come on, Jesse. Come to Freddy."

"No!" screamed Jesse. He whirled around, knocking over the stack of cartons as he dashed wildly toward the cellar steps. He only got halfway up when he missed his footing and slipped, tumbling headfirst down the stairs.

When he came to, he was alone.

The furnace was off and Freddy was gone.

Only the finger-knives remained, as shiny and new as the day they were made.

No one was talking about Mr. Blue and Mr. Green at breakfast the next morning. In fact, no one was talking at all. Ken and Shirley Walsh were staring into their coffee cups and picking at some slices of dry toast while Angela used the corner of her waffle to draw little circles in a small puddle of imitation maple syrup. Then Jesse came into the kitchen and poured himself a cup of hot black coffee.

"Why did it take them five years to sell this house, Dad?" he asked, sitting directly opposite his father at the table.

His father looked at Jesse with surprise for just a second and then looked away.

"I don't know," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "I guess they couldn't get the right price."

"And I suppose you don't know anything about a murder across the street and a crazy girl who lived here who saw the whole thing?"

"I don't know," said his father, still avoiding Jesse's eyes. "I guess they told me something about it. What difference does it make?"

Ken Walsh felt his wife's eyes on his neck and looked up at her.

"Come on, Shirl," he said, his tone halfway between anger and apology. "How do you think we got such a good deal? Listen, all old houses have stories."

"Did they tell you she went totally out of her mind?" asked Jesse, speaking to his mother now as well as to his father. "That they had to put her away? Did they tell you that her mother killed herself by the front door?"

There was a moment of silence, and then Jesse realized that his sister had started to cry.

"Mommy, I'm scared," said Angela, turning her moist eyes to her mother.

"It's all right, sweetheart," the woman replied, taking her daughter in her arms. "Daddy and Jesse are just playing make-believe." She tightened her hold on Angela and gave Jesse a hard look. "I don't think we should be talking about this now."

"You see what you're doing?" said Jesse's father. "You've upset your sister with all this talk. I don't want to hear another word about it. There's nothing wrong with this house!"

Jesse was about to tell his father about the glove in the cellar when his mother started sniffing the air.

"Is something burning?" she asked.

Jesse turned and saw that the toaster on the countertop was glowing red-hot. Suddenly, flames shot out of the slots, scorching the ceiling and the wallpaper behind the counter.

Jesse's father was on his feet a second later, beating out the fire with a dish towel. When the fire was out, he turned away from the smoldering toaster and tossed the burnt towel in the sink.

"Craziest thing I ever saw," he said, staring in bewilderment at the charred cord that hung limply from the side of the toaster. "The damned thing wasn't even plugged in!"

Jesse took one more sip of coffee and then left without saying good-bye.

Chapter 6

"This is amazing," said Lisa, studying the talon-tipped glove that Jesse had recovered from the cellar that morning. She was sitting next to Jesse in the Falcon and finishing off the remains of a fast-food breakfast. "Your dream told you where this was?"

Jesse sipped his coffee and nodded.

"Only it was more like sleepwalking," he said. "All I know is I woke up on the cellar floor, and there it was."

He reached into his knapsack and pulled out the leather-bound diary.

"I couldn't get back to sleep, so I stayed up all night reading this thing. It gets really crazy toward the end, after all the death stuff."

"Even crazier?" said Lisa, popping a French fry into her mouth.

"Listen to this," said Jesse. "It seems her mother took her down to the basement and showed her the glove. That's when she found out about Fred Krueger."

"Who's Fred Krueger?"

"The guy in her dream. It seems he was a real guy who went around killing kids about fifteen years ago."

"Maybe you were having a premonition or something," said Lisa. "You know, like those guys who help the police solve crimes and find missing people? Anything like this ever happen to you before?"

"Not really. You think that's what it is?"

"Could be. Anyway, don't worry about it. That diary would give anybody nightmares."

"I guess," said Jesse, already starting to feel a little bit better. Obviously, there was a logical explanation for all this.

All he had to do was figure out what the hell it could possibly be.

Jesse was trying not to think about his dream that afternoon as he stepped up to bat at baseball practice. Lisa had asked to borrow the diary, and Jesse was confident that she would somehow make sense

out of the whole crazy situation. Besides, there were other things on his mind that were already beginning to seem more important than some weird dream.

Like the fact that Lisa had kissed him good-bye for the first time that morning.

It wasn't Jesse's first kiss. He had gone steady with a girl last year, and she and Jesse had done a lot more than just kiss before the relationship had ended. Still, there was something about Lisa's kiss that morning that made Jesse feel as if no girl had ever really kissed him before. It was a kiss that promised things to come that would go far beyond anything Jesse had ever experienced in his seventeen years.

"Strike two!" yelled Schneider, rudely interrupting Jesse's reverie. He turned around and looked at the coach for a second before adjusting his stance and choking up on the bat.

He hadn't even noticed the first strike.

Jesse looked down the baseline and saw that the runner on third was Ron Grady. He knew by the expression on Grady's face that the boy had no expectation of being driven home while Jesse was at bat.

I think I'll surprise him, thought Jesse, focusing his complete attention on the ball in the pitcher's hand. He watched the ball coming at him now, his mind on nothing but the point of contact between the fast-moving sphere and the bat in his hand. He connected with a solid crack, slamming the ball past the pitcher and reaching first base just as Grady touched home plate to score the winning run.

"You hit that ball pretty good, Walsh," said Grady in the locker room after practice.

"It was okay," said Jesse modestly. Everyone on the team had congratulated him on his playing that afternoon, but hearing it from a guy like Ron Grady was an unexpected bonus.

"Who told you to choke up that way?" asked Grady as he finished buttoning his shirt.

"My dad," said Jesse. "He played in the minors for a while when he got out of college."

"No shit?" said Grady, genuinely impressed.

Jesse shrugged and finished dressing. He wasn't sure that a guy like Grady could ever really be anybody's friend, but it sure would be nice not to have him as an enemy.

"Schneider shouldn't have called you out on that double," said Jesse, recalling one of several bad calls the coach had made that afternoon.

"Yeah," said Grady, "Schneider's got a stick up his ass today."

Jesse laughed. "Schneider's always got a stick up his ass," he said, and Grady nodded in agreement.

Of course, the conversation might have taken a whole different turn if either boy had heard Schneider enter the room a few moments earlier.

By the time Jesse met Lisa in the nearly deserted parking lot, he and Grady had spent a very long and very painful hour running laps around the athletic field.

"Sorry, Lisa," Jesse said, still gasping for breath as he leaned next to the girl on the Falcon's dented fender. "Schneider did it to me again."

"I just got here myself," said Lisa, shrugging off Jesse's lateness as she gestured toward the stack of books piled up beside her. "I've been at the library all afternoon. Cut four classes!"

Jesse glanced at the books for a second and then looked back at Lisa.

"What is all this?"

"Research," said Lisa. She smiled and then gave him a quick kiss. "Let's go for a ride and I'll tell you all about it."

They were driving down a country road that Jesse had never seen before when Lisa started leafing through one of the books on her lap.

"I'm convinced that you've had a genuine psychic vision," she said, ignoring Jesse's skeptical look. "At first I wasn't sure, because you said you never had anything like last night happen to you before. But it says in this book that almost everyone has the potential to tune in to the other world, even though most people never do. It has

something to do with the environment. Like they have to be in a place that's sending signals."

"Like a haunted house?" said Jesse. The girl gave him a look that made Jesse wish he had kept his comment to himself. "Sorry, Lisa, but I don't believe in ghosts."

"You don't have to," she said. "You just have to believe in energy. You've got electricity in your body, don't you?"

"Sure." Jesse remembered Mr. Able's lecture on the central nervous system. "Neurons, synapses, and all that stuff?"

"And heat and chemical reactions, too. Where do you think it all goes when you die?"

"I don't know," said Jesse with a shrug. This wasn't the sort of thing he had ever given much thought to. "Into the air?"

"Make a left at the intersection," said Lisa. Jesse followed her instructions as she continued her lecture. "What about essential energy? What about the soul? Does that go into the air, too? Do you think there's good energy and bad energy?"

"I don't know," said Jesse, confused by Lisa's weird questions. "Where are we going, anyway?"

"Park over there and I'll show you," said Lisa, pointing at an old burnt-out building that had suddenly appeared from nowhere.

"What is this place?" asked Jesse. He stepped out of the car, walked past the No Trespassing sign that dangled from a rusty chain between two iron poles, and read some of the graffiti that were scrawled across the building's many boarded-up windows.

"Remember in the diary?" said Lisa, grinning with excitement. "Remember how Nancy kept finding herself in a boiler room?"

"So?"

"So I did some research on our friend Fred Krueger, and this is where he worked! In this old power plant!"

Jesse stared at Lisa in disbelief as she handed him photocopies of local newspaper headlines she had found in the library.

KRUEGER FREED ON TECHNICALITY! D.A. RESIGNS!
JUSTICE DONE! KRUEGER KILLED BY MOB!
SPRINGWOOD SLASHER DIES IN HELLISH INFERNOS!

"Holy shit," said Jesse. He looked up and saw that Lisa had already climbed over the rotting boards that once blocked the entrance to the old generating plant. He quickly followed her and found himself inside a huge boiler room.

"He kidnapped twenty kids and brought them all here to die," said Lisa, looking around as if expecting to see the rotting bodies. There was a long silence before she spoke again. "Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Do you feel anything?"

"What do you mean?" asked Jesse.

"I thought you might be able to make a connection."

Jesse looked at her and smiled.

"Any ghosts in here?" he shouted, his voice echoing in the large deserted building.

"Cut it out," said Lisa. She sounded annoyed and just a little bit frightened.

"Well, what am I supposed to do?"

"I don't know," Lisa admitted. "Concentrate or something."

Jesse stared at the ceiling for a moment and then closed his eyes.

"I feel like a jerk," he said.

"Just concentrate," she whispered.

Jesse began walking around in a small circle, his eyes shut tight.

"Anything?" asked Lisa. Jesse shook his head.

Then he heard a faint scratching noise.

"Wait," he said. He walked slowly across the room toward the mesh-iron stairway that led up to the catwalk. He reached out his hand to the board that was leaning up against the bottom step and touched it lightly.

"Jesse?" whispered Lisa, her hand shaking on his shoulder as he yanked the board away.

A large black rat snarled from its nest beneath the staircase, and Jesse and Lisa ran for the doorway as fast as their legs would carry them.

A minute later they were sitting on a boulder near a clump of shade trees a few yards away from the old power plant.

"Disappointed?" asked Jesse when he had finally caught his breath.

"Disappointed?"

"About not finding any bogeymen."

"I'll get over it." Lisa smiled, but Jesse sensed that she really was feeling let down. He moved closer to her, his thigh now resting against hers. "Anyway, we proved that you're sensitive," she said. "You sensed that the rat was there, didn't you? And I can feel something about you. Sometimes I feel like I know what you're thinking."

"Do you?" said Jesse, grinning broadly as he put his arm around the girl's shoulder.

"Maybe it only happens when you're sleeping," said Lisa, snuggling up a little closer. "That's the way it was with Nancy, wasn't it?"

"Now there's an idea," said Jesse. "Maybe we should drive out to the beach tonight and lay out a couple of blankets and see what happens when I fall asleep."

Lisa smiled and caressed the hand that rested on her shoulder.

"Maybe we should," she said, her voice very soft. "Strictly for science, of course."

"Of course," said Jesse, his lips now almost touching hers. "If you're sure you wouldn't mind being out on the beach with a potential lunatic."

"Ghostbusters are fearless," whispered Lisa.

Then they were in each other's arms, and this time the kiss was for real. Jesse felt the blood pounding in his temples as Lisa pressed her body tightly against his, her tongue hungrily exploring the inside of his mouth. This was the kind of kiss Jesse had waited for all his life, and Lisa was the girl he had always dreamed it would happen with. He slid his hand underneath her shirt and was thrilled to find that she offered no resistance.

And then he pulled away, an agonized expression on his face.

"What is it?" asked Lisa.

Jesse just shook his head and groaned. His forehead was throbbing and his skin felt as if someone had set it on fire. He had never felt anything this intense before in his entire life. Every part of

his body, from the soles of his feet to his tingling fingertips, had suddenly begun to hurt all at once. It was almost as if his total being were undergoing some sort of bizarre transformation.

"It's gone now," he said, the pain suddenly subsiding as abruptly as it had begun.

"Oh, Jesse," said Lisa, throwing her arms around the boy and holding him close. "You definitely have to get some sleep."

Jesse stared at the old power plant and nodded his head. He wondered if he would ever sleep again.

Chapter 7

It was another unbearably hot night in the Walsh house. Jesse heard thunder in the distance as he tossed and turned in bed, sweat pouring down his body while he struggled in vain to find a comfortable position. *Might as well read for a while*, he thought, reaching out to switch on the lamp at the side of the bed. He touched the lamp and abruptly pulled his hand back in pain.

The switch was red-hot, and the plastic lampshade was beginning to melt.

Jesse sat up and looked around. The room was literally hot as a furnace. On his bookshelf, a candle had melted into a sticky pool of wax. The laminated shelf on which the candle stood was bubbling gently, and a record he had left out the night before was hanging limply over the edge like something out of the Dali painting his art teacher had shown the class last week.

And where was that annoying scraping sound coming from?

Jesse stood up and cautiously followed the sound to his desk drawer. He put his hand on the drawer pull and took a deep breath. *The last thing in the world I want to see right now is another rat*, he thought. Then he opened the drawer and found out that he was wrong.

The last thing in the world he wanted to see right then was Fred Krueger's glove, its fingers moving independently, scraping little cuts in the bottom of the desk drawer.

He slammed the drawer shut and listened to the sound of his own heart beating.

And then he became aware of another noise off in the distance.

Swish, thump. Swish, thump.

Jesse slipped into his jeans and stepped out into the hallway. The sound was coming from Angela's room. He pushed the door open and gazed inside.

Angela was in the middle of the room, jumping rope and chanting.

"One, two, Freddy's coming for you. Three, four, better lock your door."

She looked at Jesse, smiled weirdly, and continued jumping and chanting without missing a beat.

"Five, six, grab your crucifix..."

Jesse slammed the door and ran down the stairs. He went into the kitchen and looked out the window. There was a serious thunderstorm raging outside, with a strange bluish lightning that was almost too bright to look at. Jesse clapped his hands over his ears as the sky itself seemed to split open, a multiple flash of lightning followed by the loudest clap of thunder he had ever heard.

And then a bolt of lightning shattered the kitchen window, zigzagging its way across the room to destroy a pile of dishes that had been left on the counter overnight. Jesse stared in horror as a plume of black smoke rose from the spot where the dishes had stood just moments before.

That bolt was meant for me, he thought, dashing out the door and into the street.

It was still pouring outside, but Jesse was no longer on the familiar streets of Springwood. He was in the heart of the inner city now, walking down some dark deserted street that he had never seen before. There was a dim streetlight on the corner, and beneath the light was a seedy-looking bar. Jesse went in.

The bar was packed with the most degenerate assortment of characters Jesse had ever imagined. Prostitutes and their pimps were soliciting business from the drunks at the bar while a gang of motorcycle toughs in leather and chains hassled a pair of transvestites in the back booth. Jesse ignored an obscene suggestion from a grossly obese hooker and sat down at the bar. The bartender glanced at Jesse and drew him a cold beer. Jesse nodded in appreciation and reached for the glass.

A large hand slapped down on his wrist, grasping it tightly with powerful fingers.

Jesse looked up to see Coach Schneider standing before him with a sadistic grin on his ugly face.

He likes pretty boys like you, Grady had said, and for one fleeting moment Jesse almost wished that the large hand that had grabbed his wrist belonged to Freddy Krueger.

And then Jesse was back at school, jogging around the edge of the gym floor in his bare feet. He couldn't remember how long he had been running, but his aching lungs and pounding heart told him that it had already been much too long. Coach Schneider watched from the side of the gym, indifferent to Jesse's pain as he continued to run endless laps, every muscle in his calves and thighs seemingly strained to the breaking point. Round and round he went, the sweat streaming down his body, until he was sure he couldn't run another lap. He was about to collapse when he heard the coach's whistle blowing loudly in his ear.

Jesse had hardly stopped running when the coach grabbed him and hurled him violently against the wall of folded wooden bleachers.

"Hit the showers," barked the coach as Jesse scrambled to his feet and staggered into the locker room.

And while Jesse showered, he envisioned the very strange scene that was being enacted at that moment in Coach Schneider's office.

The coach had just unlocked the equipment locker when he heard the first of the tennis racquet strings snap. He stared at the racquet and shook his heavy head slowly from side to side.

It was very unusual for a string to snap while a racquet was hanging on the wall.

It was unheard of for a string to give off smoke before snapping.

Three strings had sizzled and snapped before the first basketball threw itself off the top shelf of the equipment locker. No sooner had the coach bent down to pick up the ball than two more balls flew out of the metal cabinet and landed at his feet. The fourth ball knocked a trophy off the coach's desk, and the fifth struck him sharply on the side of the head.

Coach Schneider was still sitting on the floor when the first of the dumbbells went whizzing by. The five-pounder just put a serious dent in the coach's filing cabinet, but the heavier one that followed managed to crack the reinforced glass of the office window.

Gym equipment was flying everywhere now as the coach crawled slowly toward the locker like a soldier creeping beneath a volley of machine-gun fire. He had just dodged an especially vicious medicine

ball when one of the jump ropes on his desk slithered across the floor, wrapping itself tightly around the coach's wrist before suddenly yanking him off balance. Schneider was struggling to free himself when a second rope shot off the top of his desk and looped itself around his other wrist. The coach was screaming for help when the office door slammed open, and he was still screaming as the ropes around his wrists dragged him out of the office and into the shower room.

Jesse watched in mute horror as the coach was hoisted upward by the wrists, his hands tied to two adjacent shower nozzles and his face turned to the tiled wall. Suddenly, his clothing fell away like so much soggy tissue paper. A stack of towels came to life, drawing blood as they snapped in midair at Schneider's exposed back and buttocks. The room was filled with steam now as a tall figure in a red and green sweater and a battered fedora slowly moved toward the coach. Cackling insanely, the man in the red and green sweater lifted his right arm to reveal the four sharp blades that fit so perfectly into the cutaway fingers of his glove. And then he brought the blades down, cutting four long, deep tears into Coach Schneider's flesh. The coach screamed in agony as the blood began to ooze from his wounds, but his screams seemed only to delight the man with the deadly finger-knives. Again and again he struck, slashing away even as his victim's body went limp and blood began to flow from the shower heads.

And then Jesse too went limp, falling to his knees in a crimson pool as he stared in disbelief at the bloody glove on his own right hand.

Ken Walsh was rudely awakened from a dream of his own when the police brought Jesse home that night.

"This belong to you?" asked the burly cop in the rain slicker. Jesse stood at his side, wearing nothing but a large woolen police blanket.

His father nodded his head in disbelief as the policeman shoved Jesse into the house.

"We found him wandering out on the highway in the rain, completely naked. Try to keep a leash on him, okay?"

Jesse's father thanked the officer for his trouble. He waited until the man was gone before turning to Jesse.

"Let's put our cards on the table," he said in a surprisingly calm voice as he paced the kitchen floor. Jesse sat at the table, sipping the hot tea his mother had just made for him. "There's not going to be any retribution. No fire and brimstone. I just have two questions. You answer them and then we'll all go to bed. Okay?"

Jesse took another sip of tea and nodded weakly.

"Fine," said his father. "What are you taking and who are you getting it from?"

Jesse almost choked on his tea. He shook his head from side to side.

"I'm not taking drugs, Dad." He turned to his mother, who sat staring at him from across the table. "Can I go to bed now?"

"Go ahead," she said, touching his cheek softly with the side of her hand.

Jesse's father was still nodding his head slowly, even after Jesse had left the room and disappeared up the stairs.

"He's on something," he said, as sure of his son's drug use as he had ever been sure of anything in his life.

Jesse's father had not changed his mind by daybreak. He was perched on a ladder removing the security bars from an upstairs window when he saw Jesse run out of the house and jump into his car.

"He needs professional help," said Jesse's mother as the boy drove off. "I think we should take him to a psychiatrist."

"Are you nuts?" asked her husband. He had had plenty of problems in his own life, but he had never gone running off to get his head shrunk by some quack with a beard and a funny accent. "What the hell is that going to do?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "I just know he needs help, and we don't know how to give it to him."

Ken began climbing down the ladder, an argumentative expression on his face. Suddenly, his wife turned to him and pointed a

threatening finger in his direction.

"Don't fight me on this!" she said before he could speak. Then she turned away and stomped back toward the house.

"He needs a kick in the butt, is what he needs!" Ken shouted. "The boy needs a methadone clinic!"

Shirl whirled around with a fierce expression that her husband had never before seen on the woman's face.

"Blow it out your ass, Ken!" she said. He was about to reply when he suddenly lost his footing and fell off the ladder.

Jesse had hardly said a word to Lisa during the entire drive to school that morning.

"I wish you'd tell me what's bothering you," she said as he pulled into the student parking lot.

"I'm fine," said Jesse, avoiding the girl's eyes. How could he possibly explain what was happening when he hardly understood it himself?

"You didn't say more than two words to me the whole way here," Lisa persisted. "You had another nightmare, didn't you?"

"Yeah," he said, reluctant to go into detail. "I definitely had a bad night."

"You want to talk about it?"

Jesse turned to her and looked her straight in the eye for the first time that morning.

"My dad thinks I'm on drugs, my mom thinks I'm crazy, and I'm beginning to think maybe my mom is right."

Lisa was about to assure him that everything would be all right when Jesse noticed the crowd that had gathered in front of the gym entrance behind the athletic field.

"Oh God," said Jesse, already imagining the worst as he jumped out of the car and dashed across the parking lot. Lisa quickly followed, chasing after the boy as he pushed through the crowd that pressed up against the police barricade.

"What's going on?" asked Jesse, picking Ron Grady out of the noisy crowd.

"Where you been, man?" said Grady, shouting to make himself heard over the hubbub. "Fuckin' Schneider got himself wasted last night." Jesse turned pale, shaking his head slowly from side to side as Grady continued. "Fuckin' guy was working late, and some fruitcake comes in and slices him up like a kielbasa. Right in the shower. They say there were bloody footprints all over the—"

But Jesse had already run off, his hand clamped over his mouth in a futile attempt to keep his breakfast from coming up.

"What's with him?" Grady asked Lisa, but the girl just stared at Jesse and wondered.

That night, an intruder visited the Walsh house.

Slowly, he climbed the long flight of stairs from the cellar and then continued upstairs to the second floor. On tiptoes, the intruder quietly passed by Jesse's bedroom and then paused before the room in which the boy's parents were fast asleep. He listened to Ken Walsh's loud snoring for a moment before continuing to Angela's room and quietly opening the bedroom door.

The little girl slept peacefully in her bed, oblivious to the shadow cast by the intruder who stepped between the girl and her night-light. Angela shifted her small body toward the center of the bed as a taloned glove reached out and pulled back the covers.

The intruder leaned forward, his breath hot on the slumbering child's soft neck.

"Wake up, little girl," he said, his voice hoarse and vaguely seductive.

Angela opened her eyes and looked into the intruder's face.

"What time is it?" she asked sleepily. Angela smiled sweetly as she gazed at her big brother, his face drenched with sweat and every muscle in his body tightly clenched.

"It's late," he whispered in his own familiar voice. He looked around, wondering what he was doing in Angela's room in the

middle of the night. "Go back to sleep."

Angela nodded, closed her eyes, and instantly went back to sleep.

Jesse reached out to cover her and was startled to see the deadly glove of Freddy Krueger on his own right hand.

Jesse spent the rest of the night in his room drinking black coffee and wondering how long a person could survive without sleep.

Chapter 8

Kerry Miller gazed at the gorgeous hunk swimming beside her in Lisa Poletti's oversize swimming pool and sighed.

Kerry knew that Lisa's parents had promised to go inside early tonight and leave her friends alone to party, but so far the Polettis were showing no signs of an early departure. Lisa's dad was still busy flipping hamburgers and hot dogs at the gas grill, wearing the ridiculous chef's hat and "Kiss the Cook" apron that he always wore on these occasions. The speakers were blaring out one of those goofy Benny Goodman records that Mr. Poletti always insisted on playing at his daughter's parties ("What's a party without the King of Swing?" Kerry once heard him ask in all seriousness), and the lights around the pool were much too bright for the kind of partying Kerry had in mind.

Lisa's mother gave her husband a sharp look as she stepped out of the house carrying a huge platter brimming with salads and condiments. Mr. Poletti pretended not to notice, but he knew that soon he would have to abandon his watchful post at the barbecue and leave the kids alone. Things had certainly changed since he was a young man. He didn't remember the bathing suits being quite that skimpy or the girls being quite so shapely when he was Lisa's age. And these boys Lisa knew! Half of them looked more like full-grown men than high school kids. There was something about the way these kids horsed around together that made Mr. Poletti very reluctant to go inside and leave this group of overactive teenagers unsupervised.

It was finally left to Mrs. Poletti to take her husband by the arm and forcefully remove him from the premises. With the greatest reluctance, the man in the oversize chef's hat turned over his spatula to one of the more responsible-looking boys before following Lisa's mother toward the house.

"We're going to bed now, dear," Mrs. Poletti informed her daughter while Mr. Poletti scowled at a muscular young man who was busy showing off his biceps to a couple of giggling girls in very skimpy bikinis.

"Thanks, Mom," said Lisa.

"Twelve-thirty," said her father in his sternest voice as he glanced at his watch. "Not one minute later."

"Twelve-thirty," agreed Lisa. "I promise."

"And don't forget to lock the gate!" shouted Mr. Poletti as his wife literally pulled him into the house.

"Good night, Daddy," said Lisa. She smiled as her parents disappeared behind the sliding glass doors. She knew he meant well, but sometimes her father could be a real pain in the neck.

The responsible-looking boy with the spatula was thinking the same thing as he watched the Polettis go inside. He waited until he saw the lights go off upstairs before giving the prearranged signal to the girl waiting next to the cassette machine. Suddenly, Benny Goodman was gone and the hard rocking sounds of Van Halen were blasting through the speakers.

"Party time," announced a boy standing at the side of the house. He flicked off most of the lights around the pool while somebody pulled a wagon loaded with beer out of the bushes. Kerry waited until the underwater lights went off before slipping off her bikini top and pressing her young body against the hunk in the swimming pool. All around the pool, boys and girls were beginning to pair off, their hands and mouths eagerly exploring each other's bodies in the warm, dark night.

Jesse Walsh sat by himself in a lounge chair at the far corner of the patio with a troubled expression on his face.

By the time Lisa pushed her way through the crowd of dancing teenagers whose writhing bodies blocked her way, Jesse had disappeared into the portable cabana at the edge of the pool. Lisa knocked on the door and called his name.

"Just a minute." Jesse slipped on his pants and shirt before opening the door. Lisa walked in and shut the door behind her.

"I think I'd better go," said Jesse, avoiding Lisa's eyes as he buttoned up his shirt. "I'm just not into it tonight."

"Do you want to talk about it?" Lisa rested her hand gently on his back, but he shook it off and stepped away.

"Just leave me alone," he said. "Please."

"You're not being fair," said Lisa, joining Jesse on the wooden bench as he sat down to put on his shoes. "I'm worried about you. I want to help you get through this thing."

"What are you going to do? How can anybody help?" He looked at her with terrified eyes. "I'm going crazy, Lisa, and I don't want to have you watch me falling apart."

"It's okay, Jesse," the girl said, her hand on his shoulder.

"I don't know what to do," he said, clutching Lisa's hand tightly in his own. "I'm afraid to go to sleep and I'm afraid to stay awake. I don't know what's going to happen to me."

"We'll figure it out together," said Lisa. "We'll stay up all night if we have to. I won't let anything happen to you. I promise."

He looked into her eyes, and she kissed him gently on the mouth. Then she kissed him again, only this time the kiss was a little harder. Jesse put his arms around Lisa and pulled her close. Their lips parted now, their mouths pressed together as they held each other tight. Jesse slipped off his shirt and felt the warmth of Lisa's flesh against his bare chest. Without speaking a word, they slid slowly but deliberately onto the cabana floor, deliciously lost in their boundless passion. Jesse felt Lisa's hand opening the snap on his jeans, sliding open the zipper as he kissed her on the gentle swell of breast that rose over the top of her swimsuit. Lisa closed her eyes, breathing hard as Jesse reached around to open the small hook at the back of her suit.

It was at that moment that Jesse saw the long, thick tongue dart out of his mouth, wiggling lasciviously in the air for just a moment before flicking back inside.

"What's wrong?" asked Lisa as Jesse pushed himself away and jumped to his feet.

"I have to go," he said, hastily tucking in his shirt. Lisa was still on the floor, looking very confused, as Jesse zipped up his jeans and ran out of the cabana.

Ron Grady was fast asleep when he felt the hand clamp down over his mouth.

The light clicked on to reveal the disheveled figure of Jesse Walsh.

"Jesus Christ," said Grady, glancing at the open bedroom window as he shook off Jesse's hand. "You scared the shit out of me!"

"Sorry," said Jesse. "I didn't know where else to go. You have to let me stay here tonight."

Grady looked at the clock on his night table and shook his head.

"This is important," Jesse continued. "Something really weird is happening. It started out like just bad dreams, but it's starting to get really serious."

"Go home," said Grady, feeling very tired and cranky. "Take a sleeping pill or something and call me in the morning." He flopped back on the bed and threw one arm over his eyes. "As a matter of fact, why don't you do the world a favor and take a whole bottle?"

Jesse sat on the edge of the bed and yanked Grady's arm away from his face.

"I killed Schneider," he said. Grady opened his eyes and stared at Jesse in disbelief. "Only it wasn't me," Jesse continued. "I was there, but it was like something moving around inside of me. Then last night it made me go into my sister's room, and tonight with Lisa..." He paused, trying to remember exactly what had happened. "We were on the floor in the cabana and..." He stopped abruptly and grabbed Grady by the shoulder. "It wanted me to kill them," he said, suddenly realizing what the horrible transformations had been all about.

Grady stared at him for a long time before offering his own analysis of the situation.

"You're fucked in the head," he said.

"I'm scared, Grady," said Jesse, oblivious to the other boy's skepticism. "I know it sounds crazy, but there's something trying to get into my body."

Grady shook his head and grinned lewdly.

"The only thing trying to get into your body is female and waiting for you on a cabana floor. And you want to sleep with me. Go figure!"

"Look," said Jesse, "I don't care if you believe me or not—"

"I believe you. You had some scary dreams, right?"

"No!" Jesse shook his head, no longer certain of what to believe. "I don't know. Everything's all mixed up. The important thing is that I'm in trouble and I need your help."

Grady looked at Jesse and sighed. Trouble was something he understood.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Just watch me," said Jesse. "If anything weird happens, like if I have a nightmare or I start walking in my sleep, you have to bring me out of it. Hit me over the head if you have to. Just don't let me leave."

Grady started to crack wise but thought better of it. Instead, he just nodded in agreement.

"And whatever you do," Jesse added, settling himself into the chair next to the bed, "for God's sake, don't fall asleep!"

"Right," said Grady, turning on the TV with his remote control. He was watching for less than half an hour when he became aware of Jesse's soft snoring at his side.

"Sweet dreams, buddy," Grady whispered as he turned off the TV. He watched Jesse sleeping peacefully for a moment and thought about what the boy had told him. It took Grady less than a minute to decide that only a real jerk would take Jesse's crazy story seriously. He turned off the light and pulled the cover up over his shoulders to settle in for a good night's sleep.

And then Jesse's eyes snapped open.

"It's happening again," he said, flinging himself out of the chair and onto the floor. Grady was on his feet in an instant, but he didn't know what to do for the boy who was now twisting and writhing on the bedroom floor, clutching his stomach and flailing about in unbearable agony. Grady had never seen anyone throw a fit, but he knew that Jesse was suffering something far more intense than any ordinary seizure. From the look on his face, Grady guessed that Jesse felt like someone strapped into an electric chair at the moment the switch is thrown.

"Jesse?" he said, feeling more helpless and frustrated than he ever had before in his life. But Jesse just rolled silently on the floor, his body contorted as if every fiber of his being were undergoing some

excruciating transformation. Then slowly he raised his right hand, his fingers extended and spread far apart.

Grady watched in horror as four razor-sharp blades emerged from within the tips of Jesse's fingers like new teeth breaking through a baby's gums.

Then, as if some crazed beast were tearing its way through his flesh, Jesse's skin began peeling away. Suddenly, his chest literally burst open as countless capillaries exploded in the air, a fine spray of blood forming a hazy crimson cloud around the figure that once was Jesse Walsh.

And out of that cloud stepped a man in a filthy red and green sweater, an evil grin on the disfigured face beneath his battered fedora.

For just one moment, Grady would have sworn that he saw Jesse's tormented expression covering the man's face like some obscene Halloween mask.

Grady made a quick break for the door, but his speed was no match for that of the creature in the dirty sweater. Lifting Grady by the throat, he cackled wickedly while the boy struggled in vain to free himself from the monster's iron grip. Grady's parents were already at the door, pounding on the outside while their son hung helplessly in the air on the other side.

The Gradys were still trying to break the door down when they heard the first of their son's screams. They jumped back as four sharp and reddened blades ripped through the wood, the blood of Ron Grady oozing from the knife holes as if the door itself were bleeding. The blades wiggled free and then pierced the door again as Ron Grady screamed for the last time, his vital organs already shredded beyond any hope of repair.

Inside the room, the man in the red and green sweater released his victim, watching as the boy's mutilated body slid lifelessly to the floor in a pool of his own blood.

And then Jesse looked at his reflection in the mirror and saw the evil face of Freddy Krueger leering back at him.

"You son of a bitch!" he shouted, pulling the blood-drenched glove off his hand and hurling it at the mirror with all his might. "You

killed him!"

The mirror cracked, but the face in the mirror was still laughing maniacally as Jesse fled screaming into the night.

Chapter 9

Lisa's party was still going strong when Jesse staggered to the Polettis' front door.

"Oh my God!" said Lisa as Jesse collapsed in her arms, his clothes torn and dirty and covered with blood.

"I killed him," said Jesse, still trying to make sense of it. "I killed them both."

Lisa held him tightly in her arms as the tears rushed to his eyes.

"I killed Grady," he said. "I killed Grady, and I killed Schneider too. Don't you see?" he said, his damp eyes widening with the horror of it. "The bastard is inside me!"

"What are you talking about, Jesse? Who's inside you?"

"He's just waiting to take me," Jesse said, still gasping for breath after the long run from Grady's house. "He gets me when I fall asleep."

"Who, Jesse?" Lisa persisted. "Who's waiting to get you?"

"Krueger," he said, spitting out the name like some foul curse. "Fred Krueger's been trying to get hold of me ever since I moved here. He needs me to get out of his world and into ours. He's been using me all along, and he's going to use me again."

"This isn't happening," said Lisa, looking Jesse hard in the eye and trying to make him understand the absurdity of what he was saying. "You're just confused. It's Schneider and the glove and the diary—"

"No!" he shouted, pushing her away in frustration. "You don't understand what I'm telling you! He tried to make me kill Angela last night. Look at my hands!"

He held out his bloody hands and started to cry again.

"I killed Grady," he repeated, trying desperately to make sense out of all the insanity. And then he realized the horrible truth. "He owns me," he said simply, staring at Lisa with eyes suddenly drained of all hope.

But Lisa was not prepared to surrender. She took him in her arms and held him close, stroking his wild hair as she spoke.

"Nobody's going to take you away from me," she said, her voice soft and reassuring. "There's got to be a logical explanation for everything. All we have to do is figure it out."

Then she remembered something Nancy Thompson had written.

"Wait a minute," she said, leading Jesse into the study. She reached into a desk drawer and pulled out the red leather-bound diary. "Listen to this," she said, flipping to the last entry. "He is evil itself," she read, her voice trembling with excitement. "I know now that I brought him into my world. We all did. Our screams gave him all the energy he needed. Now I will take it back. Now I will deny him his energy." Lisa closed the book and held it up for Jesse to see. "Nancy wasn't crazy. All this really happened."

Jesse shook his head from side to side, unable to absorb whatever it was that Lisa was trying to tell him.

"It's true," Lisa said. "You can fight him. Remember what I said about good energy and bad energy? Fred Krueger is bad energy. He thrives on our anger and our hatred and our fear. All we have to do is stop being afraid of him."

Jesse was about to ask how they were supposed to do that when he suddenly felt the sharp pain in his stomach.

"He's coming back!" he gasped, clutching his middle. "Get out of here, Lisa!"

At that moment, every window in the house slammed shut and locked. The dead bolt on the front door slid into place with a loud snap.

"Fight it, Jesse!" said Lisa, struggling not to be swallowed up by her own fear.

Upstairs, Mr. Poletti sat up with a start as the latch on the bedroom door snapped shut.

The temperature in the study had risen to well over a hundred degrees. Lisa's clothes clung to her sweat-soaked body as she watched Jesse rolling in agony on the floor.

"You created him," she said, shaking the boy and trying to make him understand. "You can destroy him. He lives off your fear, Jesse. You can fight him!"

"I can't," said Jesse, gasping for breath as Freddy struggled to push his way out.

In the living room, the water in the aquarium had begun to bubble. Three poached angelfish floated lifelessly to the surface.

Outside, Kerry was surprised to see a steamy mist rising from the surface of the swimming pool. Across the patio, a tray full of hot dogs had suddenly burst into flames. Moments later, the bulbs in the Japanese lanterns around the pool began to explode. A couple who tried to escape discovered that someone had padlocked the iron gate around the patio.

"You can't be afraid of him," Lisa screamed as Jesse writhed on the floor. "The bastard doesn't even exist!" But even as she spoke, she saw the four razor-sharp blades that were gouging deep channels on the edge of the desk to which Jesse clung.

The water in the aquarium came to a boil. The glass shattered, flooding the living room carpet with steaming water and dead fish. Then the TV came on for just a second before the picture tube exploded.

"Damned door is jammed shut," Mr. Poletti told his wife, yanking on the doorknob. The clock radio at the side of the bed had slowly begun to melt.

The water in the swimming pool had reached the simmering point, and choppy waves were breaking against the sides of the pool. Kerry and her new boyfriend were trying to climb to safety, but they were driven back by the hot, stormy waters. Tears were streaming down Kerry's face as she felt her skin begin to blister in the heat.

"He can't fight me," Freddy told Lisa, rising from the floor with a look of triumph on his horribly scarred face. "I'm Jesse now."

And then the creature in the red and green sweater was on his feet, his finger-knives gleaming in the lamplight. The awful glove swung toward Lisa, but the girl countered by catching the blades in the woolen afghan she snatched from the back of her mother's favorite chair. Before Freddy could plan his next attack, she lifted the heavy brass lamp from the top of the desk and brought it down over his head. As he stumbled backward, bellowing with rage, Lisa ran out of the study and slammed the door shut behind her.

"Jesse!" she shouted, reaching the front door only to discover that it was locked from the outside. She turned to run the other way and collided with the charging figure of Fred Krueger. While Lisa lay on the floor catching her breath, Freddy grabbed her by the foot and

sank his sharp teeth into her bare calf. Lisa screamed in pain and kicked him hard in the head with her other foot. She rolled away just as he brought down his steel talons, escaping to the kitchen while Freddy struggled to free his weapon from the oak floor in which it was now embedded.

Searching frantically through the kitchen, Lisa had succeeded in locating some weapons of her own. As Freddy burst into the room, she grabbed the heaviest and sharpest knife in her parents' collection of gourmet cutlery.

"Help me, Jesse!" she called, the fourteen-inch butcher's knife clenched tightly in her fist.

"I'm Jesse now," repeated Freddy, raising his own sharp blades and clicking them menacingly in the air. He smiled at the girl as if to acknowledge that she had put up a good fight. Lisa shook her head slowly from side to side, struggling to find the courage to drive her knife deep into the monster's heart.

And then she saw the change in Freddy's expression.

"Kill me!" he pleaded. "Please kill me!"

The voice coming from the creature's mouth was that of Jesse Walsh.

Lisa stepped back and lowered the knife. Suddenly a wicked grin came over Freddy's face, and the hoarse voice that issued from his twisted lips was once again his own.

"Go ahead, Lisa," he croaked. "Kill him!" He stepped forward, and Lisa swung her knife at him. Freddy laughed and jumped back, the blade just inches from his chest. He attacked again, and this time Lisa drove her knife deep into the monster's shoulder.

And now she was filled with rage, hating this grotesque beast for all the pain and suffering he had caused. Again and again, she plunged the knife into Freddy's retreating form, slowly driving him back across the room.

Then he spoke to her, his voice once again that of Jesse Walsh.

"Lisa," he said. "Lisa, I love you."

She was crying now, her knife raised high as tears streamed down her cheeks.

And then Freddy grabbed her wrist, and Lisa knew that Jesse was gone. The knife fell from her hand as the monster tightened his grip, his own glistening blades raised high for the kill.

"Please, God," she whispered, her eyes shut tight as she prepared to die.

And then she opened her eyes and saw Freddy staring at her with a look that was more to be pitied than feared. They stood there for what felt like an eternity before the creature suddenly released her wrist and tossed her aside.

"No!" he shouted in a tortured voice that was not quite Jesse's but not quite Freddy's either. Lisa was still lying where the creature had thrown her when he let out a scream of unbearable pain and flung himself through the glass patio doors.

And as the glass shattered into a thousand shimmering pieces, Freddy Krueger disappeared.

Suddenly, the swimming pool ceased its violent swirling. Coughing and trembling, Kerry and her boyfriend climbed out, never before so happy just to be on dry land. Upstairs, the latch on the bedroom door snapped open. Mr. and Mrs. Poletti stepped into the hallway to breathe the cool, fresh air. The temperature throughout the house had dropped to a tolerable level almost as abruptly as it had risen. There was a long moment of silent relief as life suddenly returned to normal.

And then the ground below the patio began to shake and rumble, and the horrible figure of Fred Krueger came crashing up from beneath the concrete.

Lisa's friends screamed in terror as the sky suddenly darkened and the waters once again began to churn and boil. Freddy was laughing maniacally, his finger-knives raised high, as he grabbed kids at random and tossed them kicking and screaming into the boiling waters. Boys and girls were running in every direction now as Freddy lashed out wildly with his fingers of death. The patio was soon drenched with blood, and Lisa's guests began stumbling over the

fallen bodies of their slashed and bloody friends in their desperate attempts at escape. Those who attempted to climb the chainlink fence surrounding the pool quickly discovered that the fence had turned untouchably hot as the shrubbery that was bursting into flame at the side of the house. His dark eyes gleaming with evil joy, Freddy lifted one of the boys high over his head, swinging him in the air before sending him flying into the gas grill with a bone-shattering crash. A huge tongue of flame shot high into the air as Freddy gleefully slashed out at his helpless victims.

"You are all my children!" he screamed, his arms raised high overhead in triumph.

Suddenly, a shotgun blast rang out from the living room, shattering the bowl of potato salad at Freddy's side.

Several teenagers ducked for cover as Mr. Poletti raised his pump-action shotgun again and prepared to blow Fred Krueger's head off.

"No!" screamed Lisa, knocking the barrel of the gun off target as the second shell exploded harmlessly into the cabana wall.

"What the hell are you doing?" demanded Mr. Poletti, glaring angrily at his daughter.

But Lisa was not looking at her father. Lisa was staring at the creature in the red and green sweater who now studied her with an odd expression halfway between utter contempt and undying gratitude.

And then the sky lightened and the water stopped churning as the creature turned away and walked effortlessly through a brick wall.

"Where the hell did he go?" asked Mr. Poletti, looking down only long enough to reload his shotgun.

Lisa knew, but she didn't answer.

By the time her father looked up, the girl was already gone.

Chapter 10

The hardest part of Lisa's trip to the old powerhouse was getting Jesse's Falcon to start.

Once she found the right wires to twist together and the right switches to throw in the makeshift car, it was relatively simple to wend her way along the twisted unlit roads that led to the abandoned generating plant.

Lisa had no idea how the man in the red and green sweater would manage to transport himself to his beloved boiler room, but she knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that he would be there when she arrived.

It was not until she pulled up to the building and shut off the engine that the wound in her leg began to throb. Lisa tore a strip of cloth from her shirt and wrapped it tightly around her calf where Freddy had bitten her before stepping out of the car.

A pair of wild dogs blocked the entrance to the powerhouse. The beasts growled deep in their throats as Lisa approached, and she could see the thick string of saliva that hung down from the powerful jaws beneath their sharp teeth.

"I'm not afraid," said Lisa aloud, forcing herself to believe her own words as she approached the heavy iron door. The growls turned to threatening barks as the dogs began snapping at Lisa's hands. "I'm not afraid," she said again, ignoring the vicious beasts and passing through unharmed.

She was in the power plant now, but the huge building looked vastly different than it had on her previous visit with Jesse. This time, the old pipes were alive with steam that leaked out from between rusty rivets and torn gaskets, and there was a constant pounding noise as the ancient expansion tanks steadily belched their rancid air. The room seemed bathed in an eerie blue light, and white-hot arcs of electricity flashed intermittently in the distant corners of the building. Lisa wondered how much of what she saw was illusion and how much was real. Touching her fingers to a large steam pipe,

she quickly discovered that the heat of the pipes was very real indeed.

It suddenly occurred to her how lucky she had been to guess right about the wild dogs outside.

Lisa was studying her blistered fingers when she noticed that her injured leg had begun to ache. She casually reached down to rub the wound and felt something move on her fingers.

Lisa looked down to find her makeshift bandage swarming with big, black carpenter ants. She screamed and, quaking with disgust, began brushing the ants away with both hands.

And then, as abruptly as they had appeared, the ants were gone.

Lisa stared at her blood-soaked bandage for a moment, took a deep breath, and continued her voyage into the bowels of the old boiler room.

She was halfway up the rusted iron stairway leading to the catwalk when she thought she heard the horrible sound of metal scraping against metal. She whirled around, prepared for the worst.

There was no one there.

She continued to climb until she reached the walkway. There to greet her was the same giant rat she and Jesse had encountered on their previous visit. It fixed her with its evil red eyes and showed its pointy teeth. "I'm not afraid," Lisa said, but this time she didn't believe her own words. The vicious creature who was about to leap at her was no illusion.

And then a large black cat appeared from nowhere and pounced on the unsuspecting rat. The cat stared at Lisa with strange yellow eyes as it slowly devoured the rat, the rodent's tail protruding obscenely from its mouth while it slowly munched on the rat with loud, bone-crunching noises. Lisa felt herself on the verge of throwing up as she watched the rat's long tail slowly slide past the cat's pink lips and down its gullet. The cat chomped on its prey one more time, swallowed noisily, and then growled its satisfaction with a roar befitting a small mountain lion. Lisa gazed into the creature's demonic eyes for a moment and knew for sure that this was no ordinary pussycat.

This was a pussycat that could devour a teenage girl as easily as it had consumed the rat.

She turned and ran, her footsteps clanging noisily on the steel-mesh flooring. She felt the catwalk begin to give way beneath her feet and grabbed hold of the iron handrail. Lisa was breathing hard now as she jumped to safety, running fast without knowing where she was going or what she would find when she got there.

And then she saw Freddy Krueger and began to scream.

"You had your chance," he said, raising high his taloned glove. "Die now!"

Lisa ducked just in time as the finger-knives slashed out and scraped horribly against a steam pipe. She turned to run and saw that the walkway was now glowing, a steamy mist rising from its red-hot surface.

There was nowhere to run.

There was nowhere to hide.

"Come to me, Lisa," Freddy croaked, a twisted smile on his ugly face. "I'm waiting for you."

"Stop him, Jesse," cried Lisa, fighting back her tears. "I know you're in there!"

"Jesse's dead," said the monster, stepping closer as he clicked his finger-knives in Lisa's face. "Freddy's here."

Lisa took a step back, but it was no use. She felt the sting as Freddy struck out, his blades just nicking the flesh of her shoulder.

"Jesse!" she screamed, trying desperately not to lose her faith.

"Wanna join your little friend?" asked Freddy. Lisa smelled the creature's foul breath and almost puked for the second time that day.

"Where's Jesse?" she demanded, forcing herself to sound more brave than she felt.

"There is no Jesse. I'm Jesse now."

"I want him back," she insisted. "Talk to me, Jesse. Jesse!"

Freddy just laughed, shaking his ugly head slowly from side to side. He raised his steel blades to Lisa's face, the sharp points almost touching her eyes. Lisa forced herself to look beyond the deadly blades, summoning all her remaining strength and courage to look directly into the creature's fearsome eyes.

"I love you, Jesse," she said, meaning it as she had never meant anything before in her life.

The monster stared at her, a look of doubt and confusion in his catlike eyes. His hand began to tremble slightly. He shifted his gaze to the glove on his right hand as if he weren't quite sure how it got there.

And then he began to bleed.

He was bleeding from the same shoulder and chest wounds that had refused to bleed when Lisa inflicted them back at the house. Now they were gushing, and Freddy stared in disbelief as blood poured down his chest and arms. Then the look of disbelief changed to one of weakness and pain as the bloody creature staggered back to lean against the iron railing.

Lisa dashed past him. She was about to run for safety when she heard Jesse's voice calling her name.

"Lisa," he said. "Come and get me."

She turned around and heard the ugly sound of Freddy's wicked laughter.

"Come and get him," he croaked, clicking his finger-knives in the air, still leaning against the railing for support.

Lisa stepped toward him, suddenly more angry than frightened. The time for playing cat-and-mouse games had come to an end.

"I'm not afraid of you," she said, looking the bloody creature straight in the eye. "You couldn't kill Angela, and you can't kill me. Jesse's in there, and I want him back."

"Jesse's dead!" screamed Freddy, sounding less sure of himself than before. "I sliced him good!"

Lisa just shook her head and took another step closer.

"I'm going to take him away from you, and you're going straight back to hell."

"He's dead!" Freddy screamed, but Lisa just went on shaking her head.

"Come back to me, Jesse," she said, her eyes looking right through Freddy's. "I love you."

Freddy dropped to one knee as Lisa moved closer.

"I'll kill you!" croaked Freddy, but there was no conviction left in his voice. His blades clicked weakly at his side.

"He can't hold you, Jesse," said Lisa, ignoring Freddy's threats. "He's losing his grip. You can get out if you want to."

"He'll die with me," Freddy muttered. But Lisa just shook her head and knelt beside him. "He'll die with both of us," said Freddy as the girl took off his hat and began to stroke his head. Freddy lifted his right hand and pressed his glove against Lisa's chest. She felt the painful sting of the blades but made no move to escape. Instead she came in closer and touched her lips to his. The creature flinched and moved his talons to her back, but he was too weak to drive the blades home. He shivered as she embraced him, her mouth now pressed against his in a passionate, life-confirming kiss.

And then smoke began to rise from his body, and he pushed her away with a scream of excruciating agony. The noise of the ancient machinery was deafening now as the temperature in the room began to soar. Suddenly, a flame shot across the railing against which Freddy leaned, and small fires broke out along the catwalk. The paint on the walls began to bubble and peel as pipes everywhere started to burst. Valve wheels flew off and rolled noisily down flaming catwalks. Steam shot out from every punctured pipe as the entire boiler room filled with smoke and flame.

Lisa watched in mute horror as Freddy's flesh began to melt, his pain-racked features sliding off his exposed skull like wax dripping off a candle. And then he was on fire, his dense, all-engulfing flame becoming one with the fire that was rapidly consuming the entire powerhouse.

And just as suddenly, the fires began to die out. In a matter of moments, the deafening noise began to abate and the smoke cleared. Big fires turned to little fires, which soon died down to harmless clouds of sooty smoke. A cool blue light suffused the vast boiler room.

Lisa looked at the charred and smoldering corpse of Freddy Krueger and gasped.

The blackened body had begun to stir.

Then the creature turned to her, but the singed and sooty figure that slowly rose to its knees was not the fiendish Freddy Krueger at all.

Jesse Walsh rose to his feet, his eyes glazed as if he were awakening at long last from a horrible and vaguely remembered nightmare.

Jesse kissed his mom good-bye just as the shiny new school bus pulled up to the curb. His right arm was in a sling and he still had some minor burns and bruises, but he was feeling about as good as he had ever felt in his life.

Jesse hurried onto the bus and saw Lisa waving at him from the back. A grin on his face, he made his way quickly down the aisle, shaking a hand or two as he greeted his admiring schoolmates.

"Hi," he said, giving Lisa a quick kiss before sitting down beside her. He draped his good arm around the girl's shoulder, careful to avoid the bandage that covered her still healing wound. Lisa returned his greeting and then chuckled.

"What's so funny?" asked Jesse.

"We must look like a couple of escapees from the veterans hospital," said Lisa with a smile.

Jesse laughed and shook his head. "I still can't believe we actually —"

Lisa cut him off in mid-sentence by putting a finger gently to his lips. He nodded in agreement.

Some things are better left unspoken.

"I love you," said Jesse, holding Lisa close.

"I love you too," she said, gazing deeply into his eyes. They hugged, and Jesse's lips gently nuzzled the girl's ear.

Then they looked at each other again and Lisa closed her eyes. *This is what it's all about*, thought Jesse as he leaned forward to kiss her tenderly on the lips.

And at that moment, the taloned glove of Freddy Krueger ripped through Lisa's chest and thrust its razor-sharp blades toward Jesse's

eyes.

Jesse was still screaming as the bus shifted into high gear, racing madly into the desert with flashing lights and sparking dashboard as the nightmare continued.

A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET: PART 3: The Dream Warriors

Chapter 1

Kirsten Parker looked at the clock on her nightstand and lowered her voice.

"He's so weird!" she whispered into the telephone, glancing nervously at the door to her bedroom. Kirsten never understood why her parents made such a big fuss about letting her use the phone late at night. It wasn't as if...

"Kirsten?" called the harsh voice from down the hall.

"Gotta go," said Kirsten. "See you tomorrow."

She hung up the phone and switched on the radio just before her mother entered the room.

"Your father and I are trying to get some sleep," said Mrs. Parker, glaring angrily at her teenage daughter.

"It's just the radio."

"Go to sleep!" said her mother, saving Kirsten the trouble of having to elaborate on her lie. "And stay off the damned telephone!"

The girl waited until her mother left the room before sticking out her tongue and making a terrible face.

She sighed deeply and lay back in bed. Sometimes she wondered if her parents would have been different if they didn't have so much goddamned money. She smiled grimly at the thought of all those kids at school who envied her because she lived in such a fancy house and always wore expensive clothes. If they knew what it was really like to be Kirsten Parker...

Kirsten turned off the light and closed her eyes, only half listening to the announcer on the radio as he droned on about the talk show that was scheduled for later that evening.

"... and the suicide rate among fifteen- to nineteen-year-olds has increased by an astonishing twenty percent. Why are our children killing themselves and what can we do about it? Join us on Talk Radio—"

But Kirsten never heard the station's call letters nor found out when the program would be on. In a few seconds she was fast asleep,

and it was not until she felt the breeze in her hair and noticed the leaves falling on her face that she opened her eyes.

Kirsten wasn't in her room anymore.

She was still in her own bed, all right, but her bed was now out in the middle of a deserted street. Kirsten climbed out of bed and found herself looking at an old house she vaguely remembered seeing before in a dream.

The house on Elm Street.

"Mother?" she whispered, not really expecting a reply.

And then she heard the children's voices. She stepped closer and saw them, dressed in their finest party clothes as they jumped rope in front of the old house. The tune they were singing was strangely familiar, and Kirsten wondered where she ever could have heard those strange words before.

*One, two, Freddy's coming for you,
Three, four, better lock your door,
Five, six, grab your crucifix...*

"What is this place?" asked Kirsten. One of the little girls looked up while the others scattered. Kirsten repeated her question, but the little girl just giggled and climbed onto the shiny red tricycle that stood in one corner of the cluttered lawn. With an eerie laugh, the girl pedaled into the house at incredible speed and disappeared.

For reasons she couldn't possibly have explained, Kirsten opened the door and stepped inside. Startled by the harsh clanging of a wind chime, she looked up at the four metal tubes hanging in the doorway.

For a split second, they looked exactly like four long straight razors.

"Hello?" she said. The house was dark, but Kirsten could see by the moonlight shining through the broken windows that the room in which she now stood was completely empty except for a few dead leaves. Then she heard a metallic whirring noise coming from one of the back rooms. She stepped farther into the house and opened a large pair of sliding doors that she hadn't noticed when she first came in.

The huge room was filled with hundreds of twisted tricycles, like some obscene parody of an automobile graveyard. Kirsten had barely

noticed that the floor was awash with blood when a large, riderless bicycle rolled into the room. It was a bicycle built for two, with bloody spikes where its seats should be and two glistening straight razors for hand brakes.

And then she saw him in the shadows, the man in the red and green sweater. There was a grotesque grin on his burnt face as he crooned to her in a horrible, throaty voice that no songwriter on earth could ever have imagined—except, perhaps, in her worst nightmare.

"Kirsten, Kirsten, give me your answer, do. I'm half-crazy—"

Kirsten began to run, screaming as she descended what seemed to be an endless stairway, hurtling as fast as she could through the darkness to put as much distance as possible between herself and the terrible man at the top of the stairs. At last, she came to the bottom of the stairs and staggered through a narrow doorway, gasping for breath.

She flipped on the light and saw the bodies of a hundred teenagers hanging lifelessly from the rafters, their eyes wide open and their purple tongues lolling obscenely from their mouths.

Kirsten screamed and turned around, crashing into the man with the red and green sweater. He was laughing triumphantly now as he held her in his arms, the razors at his fingertips cold against her neck.

"I have to wake up," she said out loud, determined not to join the gallery of death in the room behind her. "I have to wake up."

And then Kirsten was alone in her room. She jumped out of bed and stared at herself in the bedroom mirror through tears of fear and anger and frustration. For just a moment, she imagined the horrible man with the burnt face creeping up behind her, putting his terrible hands on her shoulders...

She knew he wasn't really there, that he was trapped in the dream she had barely managed to escape; but the mere thought of the evil creature with the razor-tipped glove was suddenly more than she could bear. Kirsten picked up a heavy paperweight from her dresser and heaved it at the mirror, shattering it into a dozen pieces. Then

she fell to her knees, picked up the sharpest piece of glass she could find, and slashed it violently across her wrists.

Dr. Neil Guiness paused at the nurse's station and greeted the burly black orderly who stood there watching a local news report on the epidemic of teenage suicides.

"How's it going, Max?" asked the young psychiatrist.

"All quiet on the western front," the orderly replied. Max had been on night duty at the adolescent ward all that week, and he often thought he would have quit his grueling job at Westin Hills Psychiatric Hospital long ago if it weren't for a few good doctors like Neil Guiness.

"How's Kincaid?" asked Neil.

Max shrugged and shook his head from side to side.

"He's in the Quiet Room," he said.

Neil nodded and headed for the Quiet Room. He had never fully approved of strapping disturbed adolescents into the big metal chair bolted to the floor, but he had to accept the unpleasant fact that sometimes patients had to be forcibly restrained for their own protection. Still, he was constantly arguing with Dr. Maddalena about what he considered to be her excessive use of the Quiet Room.

Come to think of it, he reflected with a grim smile, he seemed to argue with Dr. Maddalena about damned near everything these days. How that woman with her antiquated ideas ever came to run a modern institution like Westin Hills was something Neil never expected to understand.

Neil peeked in through the mesh-grid window of the Quiet Room and studied the boy struggling to escape from the heavy leather straps that bound his wrists and ankles to the steel chair. Sometimes it was hard to remember that Kincaid was just a seventeen-year-old boy. Standing well over six feet and weighing something in excess of two hundred and fifty pounds, Kincaid gave off an aura of menace even in his gentlest of moods. The fact that his bullet-shaped head was completely devoid of hair only contributed to the notion that this

was someone you would be wise to avoid running into on a dark street corner.

Neil was about to open the door to the Quiet Room when he felt an icy hand on his shoulder.

"Not now, Doctor," said the hard voice of Dr. Maddalena. "We've just managed to calm him down."

Neil glanced at his boss for a moment and then looked back at the boy inside the room. He had specifically asked Dr. Maddalena not to medicate his patients unless absolutely necessary, but the older psychiatrist's notion of necessity seemed to differ consistently from his own. Sometimes Neil had the feeling that his boss was going out of her way to goad him into a showdown that they both knew he couldn't win. Neil was determined to put off that inevitable bit of unpleasantness for as long as possible. The kids needed him, and he was prepared to put up with a lot of bullshit if it meant keeping his job at Westin Hills.

"I imagine you've heard about the new assistant," said Dr. Maddalena, leading Neil away from the Quiet Room and into the doctors' lounge.

"I heard some kind of rumor about help from downtown," said Neil, pouring himself a cup of coffee.

"It's more than just a rumor, I'm afraid," said Dr. Maddalena. "Some of the parents have been complaining about the way we do things around here, and the city council decided we needed some community input."

"I just don't like the way this makes any of us look," said Neil in an uncharacteristic burst of anger. "We're all professionals around here. Don't credentials and experience count for anything in medicine anymore?"

"Perhaps in medicine," said Dr. Maddalena with a deep sigh, "but not in politics, which is what this ultimately boils down to. Anyway, there's nothing any of us can do at this point. The cavalry is on its way, and we'll just have to make the best of an unpleasant situation. I'm sure she won't get in anybody's way."

"She'?"

Before Dr. Maddalena could elaborate, Max came running into the lounge.

"We got another one in the E.R.!" he shouted. Neil and Dr. Maddalena instantly jumped up and raced toward the Emergency Room.

"Her name's Kirsten Parker," explained the nurse, struggling to hold down the girl who violently resisted every effort to staunch the flow of blood from her torn wrists.

"Get away from me, you bastard!" the girl screamed, her eyes glazed and her features contorted in fear and disgust.

Max rushed to Kirsten's side, using his considerable mass to steady the girl while one of the doctors attempted to stitch up her bloody wrists. Suddenly the girl twisted away, throwing Max across the room with a force that seemed to belie the considerable difference in their sizes. Flinging herself into the corner of the room, she knocked a tray of instruments to the floor and picked up a large pair of surgical scissors. From the way she held the scissors in front of her, no one in the room doubted that she would skewer the first person who dared to come near.

Neil prayed that the girl would not decide to turn the scissors on herself.

"No one's going to hurt you," he said, taking a tentative step forward. Kirsten jabbed at him with the scissors and he quickly stepped back. Neil stood there helplessly as the girl began to rock slowly from side to side, eerily singing to herself in a weak and trembly voice.

*...five, six, grab your crucifix.
Seven, eight, better stay up late.
Nine, ten..."*

Suddenly, Kirsten stopped and stared at the figure that had appeared in the doorway.

"Never sleep again," said the voice of Nancy Thompson, completing Kirsten's rhyme.

Neil turned to see the young woman framed in the doorway, her eyes locked on those of Kirsten Parker.

Suddenly, Kirsten stopped rocking and her eyes cleared as she let the scissors drop to the floor. Suddenly drained of energy, the girl fell to her knees and began to cry. The doctors immediately rushed to her side, meeting with no resistance as they hastily treated her wounds.

"Who taught you that rhyme, Kirsten?" demanded Nancy, but the girl just sat on the floor, staring at Nancy as if suddenly rediscovering a long-lost friend.

The cavalry has arrived, thought Neil Guinness.

Chapter 2

"What was that all about?" asked Neil as he sat across from Nancy at the cafeteria table.

Nancy took a sip of hot black coffee and shrugged her shoulders.

"Just an old nursery rhyme," she said. "Something kids use to ward off the bogeyman."

"You believe in bogeymen?" asked Neil.

"Maybe," said Nancy with a smile. She was enjoying their flirtatious banter, especially after the tense scene in the Emergency Room. It had been a long time since Nancy had felt this comfortable with a man. She began to think about the first time she kissed Glen at the sophomore dance; then she forced herself to return to the present.

There was something about this handsome young doctor that made her want to tell him things—things she had not talked to anyone about for many years. Nancy was very glad that her professor had used his influence on the city council to get her this position at the hospital. When she decided to go for a degree in psychological counseling after... after what happened on Elm Street, Nancy swore that she would do whatever she could to help other young people in trouble. Getting this job at Westin Hills in the middle of a teenage suicide epidemic was like the answer to her prayers.

And meeting Neil Guiness was like icing on the cake.

"Tell me, Dr. Guiness—"

"Neil," he said with a gentle smile.

"Neil," said Nancy, returning the smile, "what do you think is going on around here?"

Neil considered a wisecrack and then thought better of it.

"It's hard to say," he replied with a shrug of his broad shoulders.

"It could be environmental. Maybe drug-related."

"None of the kids—victims or survivors—was using drugs."

"There's a reason for everything," said Neil, a slight tone of annoyance creeping into his voice. He was beginning to like this young woman very much, but he didn't much like being reminded

that he didn't have a clue to why young people were suddenly killing themselves off in unprecedented numbers.

"I'm sure there's a perfectly logical explanation," said Nancy soothingly. "I just can't figure out what the hell it could be."

"I used to work in a veterans' hospital," said Neil. "There's something called Delayed Stress Syndrome that you see a lot in those kind of places that closely resembles what these kids seem to be going through."

"Shell shock?" asked Nancy.

"In a manner of speaking. It's like they've been in some sort of heavy combat and can't quite figure out how to deal with it."

"Combat," echoed Nancy.

"Right," said Neil, feeling vaguely annoyed by the imprecision of his diagnosis. "The vets get better eventually, and these kids will, too."

"I wouldn't count on it," said Nancy.

"Is that your professional opinion, Doctor?" asked Neil sarcastically.

Nancy looked him in the eye and saw that this was neither the time nor the place to tell him her own admittedly bizarre-sounding theory of what was going on.

"I'm tired," she said. "We'll talk more in the morning."

"Whatever you say," replied Neil.

"One more thing," said Nancy as she rose to leave. "Do any of these kids have nightmares?"

"Funny you should ask," said Neil, caught off guard by Nancy's perceptive question. "I've hooked them up to the EEG machine, and none of them seems to have REM sleep."

"You mean...?"

"They don't dream," said Neil, nodding his head. "I almost get the impression they're afraid to dream."

Nancy was about to tell Neil something very important about her own experience in the world of dreams when she accidentally knocked over her purse. Neil bent down to help her pick up the spilled contents and paused over a bottle of large yellow pills.

Hypnacyl, 60 mg, read the label.

Nancy snatched the bottle out of his hands and put it back in her purse.

"Good night, Doctor," she said, suddenly feeling more than a little uneasy.

"Good night," he said. He waited until Nancy was out of sight before taking a pad out of his jacket pocket and jotting down the name of her medication.

Neil had to look in the latest supplement to his pharmaceutical reference book to find any mention of Hypnocol.

Experimental, cautioned the text. Effective for the management of the manifestations of psychotic disorders. Possibly effective for sedation where dreamless sleep is considered optimal and for suppression of night terrors.

Neil closed the book and made a mental note to remember that all of Nancy Thompson's observations about mental health did not necessarily come out of an introductory psych book.

Kirsten Parker went to sleep that night clutching a crucifix tightly to her chest.

She had never considered herself especially religious. The Parker family had always gone to church on the major holidays and given generously to all the right charities, but somehow the discussion of spiritual matters had never been a central feature of the family's religious life. Still, Kirsten clung to the belief that there had to be something out there bigger and more important than just our brief lives on this tiny planet tucked away in an obscure corner of the galaxy. She had never been able to share her mother's disdain for people who espoused unconventional religious viewpoints. Whether they chose to call the universal life-force Allah or Tao or The Great Hunka-Munka, Kirsten figured everybody was basically talking about the exact same thing.

As she began to get sleepy, Kirsten glanced at the tiny figure on the crucifix and wondered if Christ had suffered as she herself was now suffering. She closed her eyes, feeling warm and secure in her

confidence that God, whatever She might turn out to be, was watching over her as she slept.

And while Kirsten slept, the figure on the crucifix began to writhe in pain, its eyes glowing red like two tiny hot coals. Kirsten awoke suddenly to the sound of a squeaky wheel. She looked across the room and saw a tricycle slowly melting as if from some intense inner heat. Kirsten climbed out of bed and walked through the door, knowing even as she did so that she would soon be back in that strange house that haunted her dreams every night.

The house on Elm Street.

And she knew too that she had to pass through that all-too-familiar living room until she found the cellar door, and that she would open the cellar door, and that he would be there as he always was, as large as life and ten times as ugly.

"Did you cross yourself today?" asked the man with the burnt face, leering at Kirsten as he crossed himself with his razored glove, blood and pus oozing from his rotting skin. Kirsten began to scream, the man in the striped sweater just a few steps behind, as she ran up the stairs in terror.

And then she was alone in a dark corridor. There was a doorway at the end of the hall, and Kirsten felt compelled to step inside the simply furnished room. She only took one step before sinking through the room's liquid floor, gasping for breath as the furniture somehow remained suspended on the unsolid floor above her. She swam with difficulty to the surface, grabbing hold of a chair as her head broke the surface. She only had time to take one quick breath before a razored hand shot up from somewhere below, pulling her back into the murky waters. Kicking and squirming, Kirsten broke free and, with a tremendous burst of will, struggled to solid ground.

And then the creature reappeared from beneath the water, only now it took the form of a horrible serpent with the leering face of the man in the red and green sweater.

"Help me!" cried Kirsten as the disgusting creature cornered her at the end of the upstairs hallway, its razor-sharp fangs already closing over her ankles. "Nancy!"

Nancy was sitting up in bed writing in her diary when the pen suddenly jumped out of her hand and the diary went flying across the room. She barely had time to wonder what was going on before she was pulled down into the center of her bed...

... only to crash through an enormous mirror in her old house on Elm Street.

Nancy scrambled to her feet and looked around. What in the world was she doing in her old house?

And then she heard Kirsten's screams.

Without a moment's hesitation, Nancy ran down a seemingly endless series of corridors until she found the screaming girl swallowed up to her neck by a giant serpent with the face of Freddy Krueger.

The huge snake stopped swallowing for just a second to study Nancy with its watery yellow eyes. A smile seemed to play across its wide, leathery lips.

"What am I doing here?" screamed Nancy in frustration as she clawed angrily at the creature's burnt face with her fingernails.

"You're in my dream!" gasped Kirsten helplessly. "I brought you here to help me!"

"Then wish us out of here!" said Nancy, jamming her thumb hard into the creature's eye. Kirsten nodded and took a deep breath just as Freddy's dislocated jaw began to close over her face.

"I wish we were back in our own beds," she said.

And as Freddy's jaws closed on empty air, Nancy found herself plummeting into the safety of her own bed. She looked around warily and saw the open bottle of pills on her nightstand. With a sudden intense fury, she picked up the bottle and hurled it violently against the wall.

"Damned pills don't work anymore," she said, collapsing on the bed in tears.

It wasn't until she buried her face in her hands that she noticed the charred shreds of burnt human flesh that still clung to her fingernails.

Chapter 3

Nancy didn't especially like Kirsten's mother, and she knew at once that the feeling was entirely mutual.

What was it about people with money that made them so insensitive to their children's needs? Of course, Nancy knew it wasn't fair to overgeneralize in a case like this. She had known rich people who were excellent parents too, but there seemed to be a whole lot of people out there like the Parkers who seemed to think that buying expensive presents for their kids was all it took to qualify them for Parent of the Year.

"Frankly," said Mrs. Parker, quickly signing the hospital admitting forms that Nancy had brought to her house, "I can't help thinking that this whole thing has been blown way out of proportion. Kirsten has always been a child who's sought attention, and now she's got it. Well, she's not going to get it from me."

"I'm sure of that," muttered Nancy.

"Pardon me?"

"Nothing. Was Kirsten acting any different before she made the attempt on her life?"

"Not that I'd noticed. But, then, I've been rather busy lately." Mrs. Parker sighed and straightened a cushion on her exquisite moiré couch. "After all, one has one's responsibilities to one's community, hasn't one?"

Nancy clenched the arm of her chair and refrained from answering the woman's rhetorical question. This was neither the time nor the place to lecture Mrs. Parker on where her primary responsibilities lay.

"Did she have any nightmares that you know of?"

"Only when I took away her charge cards," Mrs. Parker replied with an unpleasant smile. "I really don't see what you want from me."

"What I want from you—" Nancy stopped herself and took a breath. "I'm just looking for some answers. It's not just Kirsten, Mrs.

Parker. There've been other kids. Good kids with serious problems. I'm just trying to help them."

Before Mrs. Parker could reply, her husband abruptly entered the room. Nancy was sure that the well-tanned man in the expensive tennis outfit had been listening in from the next room.

"It was nice of you to bring the papers here, Miss Thompson," he said, "but if everything is arranged for Kirsten's stay in the hospital, we really must be getting to the club."

"My first tennis tournament," said Mrs. Parker brightly.

"How nice," said Nancy through clenched teeth. She checked the papers in her hand and saw that everything had been properly signed. There seemed no point in continuing the conversation. "Are Kirsten's clothes ready?"

"Of course," said Mrs. Parker. "Teresa said there was a suitcase ready in her room." Mrs. Parker called out for the maid, but there was no reply. "Siesta time, I suppose," she muttered in disgust.

"I'll go up and get it, if that's all right," said Nancy, curious to see Kirsten's room.

"First door on the left." Mrs. Parker gestured vaguely toward the stairs. "Please be quick about it."

Nancy nodded and walked briskly up the marbled stairway.

Kirsten's room looked very much like the room of any girl her age, with a casual warmth and sense of humor to it that was conspicuously absent from her mother's expensively furnished living room. Nancy picked up the fine leather suitcase from the bed and was about to leave when she noticed the model house on the table across from Kirsten's bed.

Then she blinked her eyes and looked again.

The doll-size house on Kirsten's table was a perfect replica of Nancy's old house on Elm Street.

Nancy stared at the house for a long moment before crossing the room for a closer look. Granted, there were a few small differences: The color was wrong, and there was a tiny sign over the front door that read "Hathaway House." Still, there was no doubt in Nancy's mind that this was an incredibly accurate scale model of the house she had lived in for most of her life.

The house her mother had died in only a few short years ago when...

Nancy closed her eyes and forced herself not to think about it. She tucked the model under one arm, picked up the suitcase, and climbed back down the stairs.

"Kirsten asked me to bring this," she lied.

"Doesn't surprise me," said Mrs. Parker, now looking slightly ridiculous in her tennis whites. "The girl's been obsessed with that thing for weeks now. Frankly, I didn't even know she was interested in architecture."

There are a lot of things we both don't know about your daughter, thought Nancy as she said good-bye and headed back to the hospital.

"About those pills..." Neil said as he walked with Nancy toward the Group Therapy Room.

"What pills are those?" she asked, although she knew perfectly well what he was referring to.

"The Hypnocal," said Neil.

Nancy shrugged.

"What about them?" she asked.

"Who prescribed them for you? Do you know that they're still considered experimental?"

"Don't worry about it," said Nancy. "I'm not taking them anymore. Damned things stopped working."

Before Neil could ask any more questions, Nancy joined Dr. Maddalena and the kids from the ward in the Group Therapy Room. She ignored the older woman's dirty look and sat down on one of the chairs that had been arranged in a circle in the middle of the room.

Nancy had never seen such a weary-looking group of teenagers before.

"I hope to get to know each of you individually over the course of the next few days," said Neil, sitting down in the last of the empty chairs. "You all know Dr. Maddalena, of course. The young lady to

my left is our newest staff member, Nancy Thompson. My name is Neil. Before we get started, why don't we all just introduce ourselves?"

"Fuck this," said Kincaid, leaning forward belligerently in his chair.

"Do you have a middle name?" asked Neil.

Everyone laughed, and even Kincaid seemed to relax a little.

"Kincaid," he said, leaning back with a grin.

"My name is Taryn," said a pretty fifteen-year-old girl with chocolate-brown skin. "I am fire."

"In this kingdom, I am called Laredo," said the boy sitting next to her. "Here, I am flesh. There: metal, rope, and ectoplasm."

"Jennifer," said a blond girl of about sixteen. Neil found her brief answer curiously refreshing. He waited a moment for the withdrawn-looking boy sitting next to Jennifer to speak and then asked him his name.

"That's Joey," said Jennifer. "He doesn't talk. He used to be a debater in school, but he hasn't spoken to anyone since he's been here."

Neil nodded and turned to the last boy in the group, who identified himself as Philip.

"I walk in my sleep," the boy added. He opened his mouth as if he were going to say more but then shook his head and looked away.

"It's good to meet all of you," said Neil. "I know it's late and we're all tired, but I'd like to try an experiment before we call it a night. Has anyone here ever been hypnotized?"

"More bullshit," said Kincaid.

"Does it scare you?" asked Neil.

"Nothing scares a Brother of the Dream!" said Laredo.

Neil smiled weakly and nodded his head.

"You've all had bad dreams," he continued, "and I think some of you are having trouble remembering exactly what the dreams have been about. If we can just get a handle on your nightmares—"

"I'd like to try," said Kirsten.

"Good," said Neil, glancing briefly at Dr. Maddalena before continuing. "I'd like you to close your eyes now, Kirsten. Just listen to my voice and relax. Forget about everything but the sound of my

voice. Let the walls of the room fall away. There's nothing here but you and the sound of my voice. Now, as you begin to relax, I want you to remember what happened before you tried to hurt yourself. I'm going to start counting backwards from five to zero, and when I reach zero I want you to tell me exactly what happened that day." Kirsten nodded, her breathing slow and regular. "I'm going to start counting now. Five, four, three, two, one, zero..."

"I'm doing my homework," said Kirsten, her eyes now lightly closed and her features perfectly relaxed. "It's late and I'm very tired. I fall asleep. And now I'm in the dream. I can see the house. There's a terrible smell..."

"Go on," said Neil, surprised to see that the others had also closed their eyes and were nodding in agreement.

"It's his face," said Kirsten, her voice trembling slightly. "It's all burned and scarred. And he's after me. He says he's going to hurt me real bad! I won't let him! I'll wake up!"

"Listen to me, Kirsten," said Neil, alarmed by the terror in the girl's trembling voice. "I'm going to count backwards again—"

"He's hurting the children!" shouted Kirsten.

"I'll get him," said Taryn, her eyes shut tight. "I'll burn him with my fire!"

"I need help!" shouted Jennifer.

"Don't worry," said Laredo. "With my golden sword shall I slay the Wicked One."

"Grab on to my legs!" said Kincaid, his eyes still closed as he leaped to his feet. "I'll fly us to safety."

"Look out for the claw!" warned Philip.

"Motherfucker!" screamed Joey, diving across the room at some invisible assailant.

Nancy watched in silence as Neil and Dr. Maddalena attempted to restore some semblance of order. It wasn't until Kirsten abruptly vomited that the spell seemed to be broken. In that instant, all eyes opened and the six young people fell back to their seats totally exhausted.

Nancy had the strangest feeling that she could have helped them if only she had dared to close her eyes.

"Are you okay?" whispered Nancy.

Kirsten sat up in her hospital bed and nodded her head.

"Getting better," she replied, speaking softly so as not to disturb Taryn, who slept peacefully in her bed across the room.

"I brought you something from home." Nancy set the model house down on the girl's nightstand.

Kirsten looked at the model for a long time before turning back to Nancy.

"Why did you bring that?" she asked.

"Why did you make it?" answered Nancy.

Kirsten shrugged and averted her eyes.

"Maybe I want to be an architect," she said.

"Maybe," said Nancy. "But why this particular house?"

"I just made it up," said Kirsten. "It's not any special house."

"It's special to me," said Nancy. "I grew up in this house. Right near here, on Elm Street."

Kirsten stared at her in genuine bewilderment.

"But this is the house I dreamed about," she said.

"When did you first see it?"

"I've never seen it," said Kirsten. "Except in my dreams."

Nancy stared at the girl for a long moment and then shook her head slowly from side to side.

"I had a dream the other night," Nancy began.

"I know," said Kirsten. "I meant to thank you."

"Are you saying...?"

"It really happened," said Kirsten. "I pulled you into my dream. That's my gift."

"Your gift," echoed Nancy, trying to make sense out of the girl's words.

"All the kids have gifts," said Kirsten. "I think that's why we've survived this long."

"Did you ever do anything like that before?" asked Nancy, still trying to grasp the awesome implications of being pulled inside

someone else's dream.

"Just with my brother," said Kirsten. "When I was little, sometimes I'd make him help me when I was having a bad dream. He never remembered anything in the morning, though. I was never really sure it had happened. Until now."

"The man who was chasing us," said Nancy, her mouth suddenly very dry. "Have you dreamed of him before?"

"I think so," said Kirsten, paling slightly. "It's hard to remember."

"I know." Nancy placed a hand gently on Kirsten's forearm. "Why do you keep dreaming? The others have stopped."

"I always thought I could get away," said Kirsten. "Now I'm not so sure."

"Do you think," said Nancy, involuntarily tightening her grip on the girl's arm, "do you think you could pull him out of a dream? The way you pulled me in?"

"No way!" said Kirsten, suddenly releasing herself from Nancy's grip. "I don't ever want to see that creep again!"

"I'm afraid," said Nancy with a sigh, "you may not have any choice about that."

Chapter 4

"You drink a lot of coffee," said Neil.

Nancy shrugged as the waitress in the coffee shop refilled her cup.

"Habit I got into"—she hesitated—"when I was in high school. So... you have a private practice when you're not at the hospital playing savior?"

"Sure," said Neil. "I interpret dreams at a local carnie."

"They pay you in popcorn?"

"Some. Mostly I get a hundred bucks an hour."

"People pay you to tell them about their dreams?"

"Are you kidding?" Neil said, not noticing the serious tone that had crept into Nancy's voice. "For a hundred dollars an hour, I dream *for* them."

"That's a good idea," said Nancy, staring off into the distance.

"What's that?"

"Paying someone to have your dreams."

There was an awkward moment of silence before Neil spoke once again. "Your folks still live around here?" he asked.

"My mom's dead," said Nancy a little too quickly. "She died in her sleep."

"Sorry," said Neil.

"My father disappeared, right around the time my mother died. I tried to find him for a long time. Traveled all over. Then I came back." Nancy paused and looked Neil straight in the eye. "I used to have bad dreams," she said.

Neil nodded and took a sip of coffee. Sometimes he wondered how people ever talked at all without coffee to sip during the awkward pauses between topics.

"Dr. Maddalena said you had some experience with kids who were hurting themselves."

"There was some trouble on Elm Street years ago. Some people died. Nothing on this scale, though." Nancy looked up and put her hand on Neil's wrist across the table. "Do you believe in other realities?" she asked.

"You mean like the Wizard of Oz?" asked Neil with a grin.

"Forget it," said Nancy, withdrawing her hand.

"Hey, I'm sorry," said Neil, genuinely regretting his flip remark. "I was only joking."

"Don't patronize me, Neil," said Nancy angrily. "There are things I have to tell you about these kids. Important things."

"Terrific," said Neil. "Only let's not talk here. Why don't we go over to my place, break out a bottle of semi-expensive wine, and have a serious talk?"

"I don't drink," said Nancy.

"Instant coffee, then. How's that sound?"

Nancy smiled in spite of herself. Neil Guiness could be infuriating, but Nancy didn't seem to be able to stay mad at him for more than a few moments at a time.

It wasn't until they were at his house and she told him about the model that she found in Kirsten's room that he really made her angry.

"All right," said Neil, adding a carefully measured spoonful of sugar to his coffee cup. "For the sake of argument, let's suppose she never saw the house on Elm Street before. And somehow she builds a perfect model of the house you lived in when you were a kid. So what does it prove?" He took a sip of coffee and shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe she'll grow up to be your real estate agent."

"You're not being funny," said Nancy, deciding that perhaps the time had come to tell him the whole incredible story. "Something really amazing happened last night. While I was home in bed, Kirsten was in the hospital having a nightmare."

"This is getting scary," said Neil with a big grin on his face.

"You know something?" said Nancy, now thoroughly annoyed by Neil's flippant attitude. "You may have advanced degrees up the ass, but you don't know anything about people!" She jumped to her feet and started heading for the door.

"Wait a minute!" said Neil, chasing after her. "I was only—"

"You don't really care what's wrong with these kids," said Nancy, suddenly wheeling around and pointing an accusing finger at him.

"You just want to get everything under control, get your gold star, and go home."

"That's bullshit, and you know it," said Neil. "I care just as much as you do. I just don't happen to think that it's such a great idea to start believing in my patients' delusions."

"There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy, Neil Guiness."

"Okay," said Neil, reluctantly conceding the point. "Maybe I'm not always as open-minded as I could be. A person gets kind of cynical after a few years in med school. But I'm trying. Give me another chance, would you?"

Nancy glared at him for a long moment, sighed deeply, and sat down.

"Pour me another cup," she said.

Most of the time, Max enjoyed working at Westin Hills.

Not that being an orderly in a county mental hospital was the greatest job in the world. The pay was lousy and the hours were worse. Still, working at the hospital made Max feel as if maybe he were doing somebody some good, and that was more than he could say about any other job he'd ever had in his life.

Having Doc Guiness around made a big difference, too. The doc really cared about these kids, and he seemed to share Max's belief that you can't always go by the book. Helping the kids get better was the important thing, and rules and regulations were only there to be used or ignored, depending on what was best for the kids at the moment.

Unfortunately, Dr. Maddalena didn't seem to see things the same way. As far as Max could tell, the Dragon Lady believed that rules and regulations were the end-all and be-all of running an institution. If the kids had to suffer, so be it. Patients come and go, but the hospital is forever.

Max felt like wringing Doc Maddalena's scrawny neck sometimes when she treated the kids as though they were case studies in some

kind of psychiatric textbook. Max never finished high school, but there was no doubt in his mind that he knew more about people than the Dragon Lady ever would, despite all her fancy degrees and diplomas. He sometimes wondered why God in His infinite wisdom gave people like Dr. Maddalena the power to hire and fire honest, hard-working guys like him and Doc Guiness.

Max tried not to worry about the world's many injustices that night as he made his evening rounds. Thinking of such things just made him angry, and more anger was the last thing these kids needed to deal with. Nighttime in hospitals is tough for everyone, and the kids in Adolescent seemed to have it especially rough after lights-out. To Max, sleep meant a welcome relief after a hard day's work, a time to set his problems aside and refresh himself for a new day to come. It was different for these kids. He had the feeling that they were all afraid to sleep, and he was sure Doc Guiness could help them if somebody could just figure out why.

Until then, it was Max's job to make sure they all got through the night as best they could.

"Lights out, gentlemen," he said, knocking lightly but firmly on the door to Joey and Laredo's room.

"But, Max..." Laredo began to protest.

"I know," said Max with a gentle smile. "You don't sleep. Well, neither does Doc Maddalena, and she'll have my black ass in a sling if she comes around and sees lights on after hours."

Max felt a special fondness for these two kids. Joey couldn't have been more than fifteen, his body already frail and twisted like that of an old man. Laredo wasn't much older, but he always looked out for the younger boy, more like a big brother than a hospital roommate.

What really amazed Max about Laredo, however, was his incredible imagination. Laredo seemed to dwell in a world of magic and fantasy, spending endless hours forging the tiny clay figures of wizards and kings and monsters that filled his side of the room. Max loved to listen in when Laredo entertained Joey and the others with his complex sagas of enchanted castles and fearless warriors. He was sure the boy knew the difference between reality and his own vivid

imaginings, yet his magical tales were woven with such conviction that sometimes even Max forgot they weren't real.

Joey's side of the room looked practically empty next to Laredo's. The only decorative item on Joey's nightstand was the remarkable model house that the Parker girl had given him. There was something almost frighteningly real about that house, Max thought—as if Kirsten had been driven to reconstruct some actual house down to the last minute detail.

"Max?" said Laredo, interrupting the orderly's thoughts. "Can I go get my clay out of the Arts-and-Crafts Room?"

"Make it fast," said Max, nodding his head. Max didn't know exactly what was troubling Laredo, but he knew the boy needed to make his tiny clay figures to maintain his sanity. "Sweet dreams, Joey," said Max, gently mussing the boy's bushy hair. Then he turned off the light and moved on down the hall to Kincaid's room.

The huge boy's frail young roommate, Philip, was already fast asleep.

"Hey, Max," said Kincaid, nodding his head in Philip's direction, "I think the kid's starting to walk in his sleep again."

"As long as he brings back coffee and doughnuts," said the orderly. Kincaid laughed as Max turned off the light. Max tried not to let the kids see him worrying, but sleepwalkers were actually one of his greatest concerns. Max couldn't be everywhere all the time, even if the Dragon Lady expected him to be. If a sleepwalker slipped past him one night and got himself hurt, Max didn't know what he would do. It was something he tried not to think about.

Max was no longer worrying about sleepwalkers an hour later as he sat in the staff lounge watching TV. Maybe if he hadn't been laughing quite so hard at Johnny's monologue that night, he might have heard Philip's soft footsteps as the boy lurched past the doorway behind him. He certainly would have noticed the stiff, unnatural way in which the boy was walking, like a poorly constructed marionette operated by an inexperienced puppeteer. Carefully, Max would have guided the boy back to bed, shut the door behind him, and made it back to the lounge before Johnny introduced his first guest.

What he would not have seen was the leering figure of Fred Krueger guiding poor Philip every uncomfortable step of the way, his strong hands hooked under the boy's armpits and his tattered shoes wedged beneath the boy's bare feet. Only Philip knew that it was the evil man in the filthy sweater who yanked him from his bed each night, forcing him to lurch awkwardly through the darkened hallways in his ill-fitting hospital pajamas.

"Why?" the boy had asked the first time, nauseated by the dreadful stench of his tormentor's burnt flesh. "Why me?"

"Why?" Freddy had replied, grinning as he drooled unconcernedly on the back of Philip's neck. "Because I *like* you!"

Laredo was not asleep the night Freddy waltzed Philip past the doorway of the TV lounge. He had stayed longer than he had meant to in the Arts-and-Crafts Room that night and happened to peek out the door just as Philip lurched by. He was about to go to the boy and steer him back to his room when something very odd happened.

For just one fleeting instant, Laredo thought he saw the man in the red and green sweater standing behind Philip.

He blinked his eyes and took another look. The image had flashed by so quickly that Laredo didn't know whether he had actually seen someone or just imagined it. Laredo was well aware of his own overactive imagination, and he often thought of the weird man who used to haunt his nightmares.

Back when he used to sleep at night.

It had seemed so real, and yet...

And then he saw it again. It only lasted a fraction of a second, but there was no doubt in Laredo's mind that Philip was not alone.

Especially after the boy passed through an unopened door.

"Kincaid," said Laredo, shaking the large boy out of his sleep.

Kincaid opened one eye.

"This better be good," he growled threateningly. Then he looked across the room and saw Philip's empty bed.

"Come with me," said Laredo. Kincaid grumbled a few of his favorite obscenities and followed the smaller boy out into the hallway. They raced quietly down the corridor until they reached a window at the end of the hall.

Philip was about to step off the curb in front of a speeding ambulance.

"Leave him alone!" screamed Kincaid, punching his fist through the locked window as the laughing man in the red and green sweater flung Philip in front of the onrushing vehicle.

Chapter 5

"I want to talk about what happened to Philip last night."

Neil looked around the room, wondering who would speak first. Philip's accident had affected the rest of the kids more powerfully than he had expected. None of them had seemed especially close to the boy in life, and yet they all seemed to be responding to his death as if it were some sort of personal insult.

According to Max, every kid in the ward began crying and hollering at the moment of Philip's death.

"He wasn't strong enough," said Kincaid, breaking the silence. The others nodded in agreement. "He couldn't handle it, so he got wasted."

"He showed his weak side to the Sorcerer," said Laredo, "so the Evil One killed him."

"Nobody killed Philip," observed Dr. Maddalena. "He was a sleepwalker, and sometimes—"

"Bullshit!" interrupted Kincaid. "The bastard murdered him."

"It's true," said Taryn. "Kirsten can tell you."

"Kirsten?" said Nancy. "Can you take us to him?"

Dr. Maddalena glared at Nancy and then turned her questioning gaze on Neil. Neil just shook his head and shrugged in bewilderment.

"Kirsten?" repeated Nancy.

"He's in the house," said Kirsten, her eyes tightly shut. Joey began to tremble and buried his head in Kirsten's lap. "He wants us to come —"

"Dr. Guinness," said Dr. Maddalena, "I'd like to speak to you outside for a moment."

Neil reluctantly followed Dr. Maddalena outside.

"I think we should increase their medication," she said when they were alone.

"No!" said Nancy, stepping into the hallway uninvited to join the conversation.

"And why not, Miss Thompson?" said Dr. Maddalena with a condescending smile.

"Because it'll lower their defenses," said Nancy. "They'll start dreaming again."

"Exactly," said Dr. Maddalena. "That's probably all they need to release all this negative energy."

"Neil...?" pleaded Nancy.

Neil glanced at Dr. Maddalena for a moment and then turned back to Nancy.

"Studies do show that we all have to dream sooner or later," he said. "It's dangerous not to."

Nancy glared at him furiously and then stalked back to the Group Therapy Room.

Neil wondered, not for the first time, if maybe the woman he loved belonged on the hospital's patient list and not on its payroll.

"I think it's time you all knew who was trying to kill you," said Nancy. The time had come at last to tell the kids the whole truth.

"Don't humor us," said Jennifer.

"He wears a brown hat," said Nancy. Everyone looked at her. "He's all burned, and he has razors on his right hand." There was complete silence in the room now as Nancy took a deep breath.

"His name is Fred Krueger," she said. "He's tough, but we can beat him if we work together. I know because I've been there."

"What happened?" asked Kincaid.

Nancy shrugged. "I thought I killed him. Apparently I was wrong. And now he's stronger than ever. He tried to kill all of you as he killed the other so-called suicides, but you people are different. You have special powers in the dream world that you use to survive. You talked about your gifts a little when Neil hypnotized Kirsten."

"Help us fight him," said Taryn. The others nodded.

"I'll try. But you have to be willing to dream again. Otherwise you'll really go crazy, and he'll have won by default. We're all going to have to face him again, but this time we won't be alone."

"Lead us into battle," said Laredo, speaking for the group.

"Kirsten can take us to him," said Nancy. Kirsten looked at her and slowly nodded. Without a word, the others linked hands. Kirsten closed her eyes, and someone began to chant.

"One, two, Freddy's coming for you..."

"Three, four..." sang someone else.

And then they were all chanting together, no longer surprised that the others knew the song that each vaguely recalled from his or her own worst nightmare.

"Nine, ten, never sleep again."

All eyes opened and looked around.

Nothing seemed changed.

"Thanks a lot," said Kincaid sarcastically.

"We're here," said a deep and resonant voice none of them had ever heard before. They turned to see Joey standing straight and tall, a smile of profound joy on his face. "In the dream, I am strong," he said, suddenly doing a cartwheel across the floor. Laughing, he strode over to Kincaid and lifted the larger boy into the air with one hand.

"In the dream, I am fire," said Taryn. She turned away from the others, opened her mouth, and spewed out a great flame. Jennifer laughed and extended her hand in congratulations. When Taryn tried to shake it, her hand passed right through.

"In the dream, I can fade away!" said Jennifer.

It was Laredo's turn next to demonstrate his gift. He picked up a chair and pressed it to his chest. The chair turned into an accordion, and Laredo began to play a merry tune for the others as he danced for joy.

Immediately, Kincaid rose into the air and floated over to Kirsten.

"You brought us here?" he asked, delighted with his gift of flight.

"It's my gift," said Kirsten, "to move in and out of the dream world and to take others with me."

"You're all special in the dream," said Nancy. "Together, you have the powers we need to beat Freddy once and for all."

"We're invincible," boasted Jennifer.

"We are the Warriors of the Dream," said Laredo, his accordion suddenly changing into a sword.

"It isn't going to be easy," warned Nancy. "I thought I killed the bastard years ago, but I was wrong. He's back, and it's going to take every ounce of courage we can muster to defeat him."

"We're ready," said Kincaid, his feet just a few inches off the floor.

"Let the games begin," said Laredo.

And then the door crashed open, and a few dead leaves blew into the room. Nancy and the others stepped outside to see a trail of slime leading around the corner of the corridor.

And there, at the end of the trail, stood Freddy Krueger, a crooked grin on his leathery face.

"Well, well! If it isn't the Brady Bunch!"

Freddy raised his claw up in the air and swung it down at Jennifer. He seemed startled when the girl faded away and his hand passed right through her, throwing him off balance and sending him crashing into the wall behind her. He quickly staggered to his feet and rushed to Laredo. Again his razored glove swooped down for the kill, but Laredo just reached out his arm to block the blow. Suddenly the boy's arm was transformed into an anvil, and Freddy's blades sparked harmlessly as they crashed against the heavy steel. Without hesitation, Kincaid propelled himself into the air and locked his powerful legs around Freddy's thick neck. It was Joey who knocked the wind out of the creature with a hard punch to the stomach. Kincaid withdrew as Freddy staggered from the force of the blow, bewildered by the sudden strength of his opposition.

Then Freddy saw Taryn standing quietly to one side, and a look of wicked joy returned to his eyes.

"Your turn to die, little girl," he said, stepping toward her. Taryn smiled, opened her mouth, and set the startled creature on fire.

The others began to applaud as Freddy wheeled around and around, trying in vain to escape the flames that engulfed him. He began shrieking in pain, his anguished cries suddenly turning into the piercing sound of a fire alarm.

And then they were in the Group Therapy Room again just as Neil and Dr. Maddalena rushed back inside.

"Who set off that alarm?" asked Dr. Maddalena, glaring suspiciously at Kincaid and the others.

"Don't look at them," said Nancy, suppressing a smile. "I've been with them the whole time."

Dr. Maddalena stared at her angrily and then left the room without saying a word. Neil looked at Nancy, shook his head slowly from side to side, and started to follow.

"See you later, Doc," said Joey.

Neil's jaw dropped open as Joey and the others strode boldly out of the room.

"What the hell's going on?" asked Neil.

"What do you mean?" asked Nancy with feigned innocence.

"The kids," said Neil. "They seem... different."

Nancy smiled.

"Healthier?" she suggested.

"I don't know. Maybe. All right, they seem healthier."

Nancy paused just a moment for effect. "I took them on a field trip," she said. "Kids love field trips."

Then she walked out, leaving Neil to stare after her in complete bewilderment.

Jennifer was having trouble sleeping since Kirsten went home.

The two girls had known each other only a few days, but a bond had been formed in that short time that was unlike any relationship Jennifer had known before. Kirsten was the only one who really seemed to understand the hell that Jennifer was going through since the dreams began. Talking to Kirsten, Jennifer sometimes felt as if maybe everything was going to work out all right in the end after all.

If only she had met Kirsten a few days earlier, Jennifer thought, maybe she never would have doused her clothes with lighter fluid and threatened to set herself on fire.

"Got a light, Max?" she asked, encountering the burly orderly as she prowled the corridor.

"Sorry." Max smiled and shrugged his broad shoulders. Jennifer's request for a light had become sort of a running gag between the two of them. Sometimes he was tempted to offer her a match just to see

what would happen. Max sensed a kind of inner strength in the girl that made him doubt that she would ever really take her own life. "Anything else I can do for you?"

Jennifer shook her head and sighed.

"Can't sleep," she said. Max wished he had a nickel for every time he had heard that complaint over the past few months.

"Why don't you go log a little tube time?" he suggested, nodding in the direction of the TV lounge.

"It's after hours," said Jennifer.

Max smiled and gave the girl a conspiratorial wink.

"I won't tell anybody," he said.

"Thanks, Max," she said. Jennifer had always enjoyed falling asleep in front of the TV at home, and it was one of the things she missed since being admitted to the hospital.

She took a few steps toward the TV lounge and suddenly stopped.

"Something wrong?" asked Max.

"No," said Jennifer. After their encounter with Freddy, Nancy had warned the kids to stay together for their own safety. For a moment, Jennifer considered going back to the room and getting Taryn...

But no, that would be silly. Her roommate was probably fast asleep by now.

Besides, what possible harm could there be in watching a little late-night television?

Jennifer walked down the hall to the lounge, tuned in an old movie, and settled herself comfortably in front of the set. Almost immediately, she felt herself become deliciously drowsy. She closed her eyes for just a second and leaned back in the overstuffed armchair.

She opened her eyes a moment later to find that the picture had disappeared.

"Damn," she said, getting up from her comfortable chair to adjust the set. Patients weren't supposed to touch the controls, but Jennifer didn't want to disturb Max after he had been nice enough to let her watch past curfew. She fiddled with the fine-tuning and impatiently spun the channel control knob, but the screen remained blank.

"Damn," said Jennifer again, smacking the side of the TV with her tightly clenched fist. Just when she was starting to feel all cozy and sleepy, the damned set was on the blink. Jennifer tried to pound the side of the television again, but this time a hand came out of the side of the TV and clenched her fist in its iron grasp.

Jennifer tried to pull away, but it was no use. She was about to scream when a second hand reached out from the screen, its razor-tipped glove raised high in triumph.

"Oh my God," whispered Jennifer as the leering face of Freddy Krueger filled the screen in horrible close-up.

"Heeeeere's Freddy!" he announced, laughing maniacally as his two extended arms tightened their grip on the terrified girl.

"Help me!" she screamed, but she knew even as she opened her mouth that no one could hear her.

"We've got a wonderful show for you tonight," said the face on the screen, a thick stream of drool oozing down its chin. "It's a delightful little program we like to call 'You Asked for It.'"

With that, Freddy's powerful arms jerked Jennifer forward, ramming her head through the TV screen with tremendous force, crushing her skull as the thick glass shattered and the picture tube imploded in a sparking, hissing mess of brain, glass, and glowing phosphors.

Max found Jennifer's body a few seconds later, her bloody legs dangling limply from the front of the set. He managed to call downstairs for help before rushing to the bathroom to puke up his guts.

Chapter 6

"Awful quiet around here," said Nancy, standing beside Max at the nurse's station.

"The kids are pissed off about not going to the funeral," said Max.

"You can't blame them." Nancy had argued with Dr. Maddalena for a long time about that one, but the woman just wouldn't listen to reason. *Rules are rules*, she had said. Nancy wanted to tell her what she could do with her fucking rules but had managed to restrain herself.

"By the way," said Max, "I think I found out something about that house Kirsten built."

"Did you?" Nancy had mentioned to Max that she would be interested in anything he could find out about Hathaway House, but she hadn't really expected him to come up with anything.

"I found this old picture in storage," he said, handing her a large framed photograph.

Nancy stared in amazement at the old photograph. It was a picture of the house on Elm Street as it might have looked half a century ago. A dozen or so nurses in starched uniforms were stiffly posed in front of the freshly painted structure.

"Seems Hathaway House used to be some sort of sanitarium back in the late thirties. Sort of a halfway house or something for mental cases. Moved to Westin Hills during the war."

Nancy studied the photograph for a minute and then looked up at Max. "Is there anyone I can talk to who might know more about Hathaway House?"

Max nodded, and pointed at one of the nurses in the photograph.

"This lady here might be able to help you. Name's Miss Sapphire. Just retired a few years ago. Lives in that old-age home just outside of town."

"Thanks, Max," said Nancy, giving the surprised orderly a grateful peck on the cheek. Then she grabbed her jacket and took off for the old-age home.

"Hathaway House?" said Miss Sapphire. She took a sip of tea and leaned back in her chair. "The first of its kind, in a way. Sort of an experiment in the treatment of mental illness. Only took women—women with really bad problems."

"Psychotics?" asked Nancy.

Miss Sapphire nodded. "Only, we didn't have any fancy names for it then. 'Possessed women,' we used to say."

"How long did the place exist?"

"Oh, only a few years. A neighborhood started growing up around it, and people didn't much like having a houseful of weird women so close by. That's why the folks that ran the place moved it out of town."

"To Westin Hills," said Nancy with a shudder.

"To Westin Hills," said Miss Sapphire.

There was a long silence before Nancy asked her next question.

"Did anything terrible ever happen at Hathaway House?"

Miss Sapphire took another sip of tea and sighed.

"Many things, child," she said. "Many things." The old woman opened the scrapbook that lay on the table beside the teapot and pointed to a picture of a pretty young woman. "This one burned to death," she said. "Still in her teens when she came to us, eight months pregnant. Transferred from the old county hospital. The Snakepit, they used to call it."

"Still do," said Nancy. Miss Sapphire nodded and continued her story.

"The way I heard it, the girl had been sold by the orderlies for five hundred dollars for the worst crazies to have their way with while the staff turned their backs. Doctors said she must have been raped a thousand times before she got to Hathaway."

"How did she die?" asked Nancy in a whisper.

"Died giving birth," said Miss Sapphire. "The baby was huge. Tore her right up. She was all alone and screaming for help when she knocked over an old gas lamp. Burned to death in her bed."

"And the baby?"

"Burned pretty bad, but it lived." She paused and shook her head thoughtfully. "Don't know what ever became of that boy."

Nancy leaned across the table and looked at the woman's picture.

"Pretty," she said.

"Pretty name, too," said Miss Sapphire. "Amanda, it was. Amanda Krueger."

Nancy lay in bed with her clothes on and tried to relax.

"This is dumb," said Kirsten, sitting on the chair at the side of the bed.

"Sorry," said Nancy, "but it's the best I could come up with."

"I don't mean the idea," said Kirsten. "I mean going alone. I should go with you. We'd have twice as much power together. You said so yourself."

"Too dangerous," said Nancy. "Besides, I need someone I can count on to stay awake." She thought of Glen once more and felt a sharp pain in her heart. "Just wake me when it looks like I have the glove."

"You've done this before, haven't you?" asked Kirsten.

"Quiet, please," said Nancy, ignoring the girl's question. She closed her eyes and started counting backward very, very slowly.

"Ten... nine eight... seven..."

And then she was on Elm Street.

Nancy took a few tentative steps down the dark, tree-lined street. The house looked very far away, and Nancy found herself moving very slowly through the thick, still air. She became aware of a loud throbbing sound and realized it was her own heart.

Suddenly, the idea of dropping in on Freddy unannounced and stealing his claw didn't seem quite so brilliant.

Nancy picked up a heavy tree branch and moved closer to the house. She finally reached the porch and was about to go inside when something crashed to the ground beside her.

"Kirsten!" cried Nancy, feeling a weird combination of anger and relief.

"I thought you might need some help," said the girl, not realizing how close Nancy had come to bashing her head in with the heavy

branch.

"I will need help," said Nancy. "I just don't know if you can give it to me from here."

"I don't know either, but I couldn't just sit there and wait." Kirsten looked around and took a deep breath. "Any sign of the bastard yet?"

Nancy was about to reply when she heard the low, menacing growl of a very large dog. Both girls turned to face the beast, but the huge creature they saw was not like any dog either of them had seen before.

The massive German shepherd with the red-and-green-striped fur had the leering, burned face of Freddy Krueger!

Nancy and Kirsten dashed into the house as the great beast lunged forward, a long string of thick saliva hanging from its half-human, half-canine jaws. The girls ran down a long, unfamiliar hallway while the creature crashed through the closed door, the sound of its raspy breathing seeming to fill the entire house.

"The cellar," whispered Nancy, taking the younger girl by the hand and leading her down a seemingly endless stairway. There was a kind of hazy fog in the air, and Nancy proceeded cautiously through a large iron door to the old furnace. "This is where my mother hid the claw," she said, pulling open the door to the firebox.

"Help me," said Jennifer, her head lodged awkwardly inside the firebox as maggots slowly but steadily devoured her bloody face.

Nancy screamed and whirled around, only to see Freddy, no longer in canine disguise, lashing out at Kirsten with the razor-tipped glove he wore on his right hand. The blades cut deep, and a thin stream of blood began to flow from the girl's wounded arm. Nancy grabbed her by the other arm and pulled her away, dragging her up the stairs and into another winding hallway that seemed to lead nowhere.

"Somebody please help us," gasped Kirsten, her left arm throbbing painfully. She thought of the strongest person she knew and called his name out loud.

Suddenly, Kincaid disappeared from his hospital bed and crashed into the corridor a few feet behind Freddy.

Immediately, Freddy wheeled around and raised his claw, surprised but delighted by the unexpected arrival of a new victim.

What he hadn't counted on, however, were Kincaid's keen survival instincts, honed to a fine edge by years of street fighting. It only took the huge teenager a fraction of a second to recognize the threat present in Freddy's gleaming blades, and that second was all the time he needed to plant his massive fist squarely between his assailant's eyes.

"Joey?" said Kirsten, closing her eyes and picturing the boy in her mind, strong and graceful as he was in the world of dreams. "Laredo? Taryn?"

And one by one, the dream warriors slipped out of their everyday reality and answered Kirsten's summons to the world of dreams.

It was Joey who landed the next punch, his fist landing on Freddy's jaw with tremendous force as Kincaid floated away from the creature's downswept claw.

"Way to go!" said Laredo, quickly accepting the bizarre fact that he was now inside someone else's dream. Without a moment's hesitation, Laredo joined his hands together as if in prayer. His hands seemed to fuse together and grow, turning first into a pair of large cymbals and then into a whirring buzz saw. "Cover me!" he called to Taryn, swiftly advancing on the cowering Freddy. The girl opened her mouth and spewed forth a great orange flame.

But now Freddy was on his feet, and he loomed above the brave teenagers, three times his normal size with claws like enormous razor-edged swords. Laredo stopped in his tracks and looked to the others for help.

"Let's get out of here," said Nancy, knowing as does any good leader when it's time to sound retreat. She grabbed Kirsten's good arm, and the others all joined hands.

"What about the claw?" asked Kirsten.

"Forget the claw!" insisted Nancy. "Just get us out of here!"

"I'll get it!" said Joey, releasing Taryn's hand to leap high into the air and kick the advancing giant hard in the chest. Freddy toppled to the ground, suddenly reverting to his normal size. Joey jumped on top of him and yanked the bladed glove off his right hand. "Get out of here!" he shouted, tossing the terrible claw to Nancy as Freddy began struggling to his feet.

Kirsten looked at the claw in Nancy's hand for a split second and then closed her eyes. Suddenly, she was back at the hospital. A moment later, Nancy, Kincaid, Laredo, and Taryn crashed to the floor beside her.

Max raced into the room and immediately saw the blood on Kirsten's arm. He was about to call for help when Dr. Maddalena appeared.

"What in bloody hell is going on around here?" she demanded, surveying the scene from the doorway. "And what are you doing here?" she asked Kirsten, apparently more disturbed by the girl's unauthorized presence in the hospital than by the bloody wound in her arm. Before Kirsten could speak, Dr. Maddalena turned her accusing eyes on Kincaid. "I swear to you, Kincaid, if you're responsible for all this—"

"It was the man in the nightmare!" said Kincaid. The others nodded their heads.

Dr. Maddalena looked from face to face and decided that further questioning at this time would be pointless. Besides, it had finally dawned on her that Kirsten was in desperate need of medical attention.

"Get her to the E.R.," she told Max, "and then call her parents and re-admit her. The rest of you, get to bed immediately. And as for you," she said turning to Nancy, "who the hell do you think you are to be playing dangerous games with my patients?" Dr. Maddalena saw the bladed glove in Nancy's hand and yanked it away from her. "Maybe you'd like to explain this monstrosity to the police."

Nancy opened her mouth to explain but found she was too weary to speak.

"I want you out of here, Thompson," said the Dragon Lady, her eyes glowing with hatred. "And if you ever dare set foot in here again, I'll personally see to it that you're committed to this institution for the rest of your pathetic little life."

She turned and stalked out, leaving Nancy all alone to reflect on all that had happened.

"Oh my God," said Nancy aloud. "Joey's still back there."

"Come on out, Krueger!" shouted Joey, never feeling so alone or helpless in his entire life.

This isn't even my dream, he thought, waiting for Kirsten to bring him back to whatever safe haven the others had retreated to.

"Come on!" he shouted again with forced bravado. "I'm *your* worst nightmare now, you ugly son of a bitch!"

Slowly he walked down a long, dark hallway, prepared for Freddy to jump out at him at any moment. He saw an open door at the end of the hall and took a deep breath.

"Let's get this over with," he said aloud as he stepped into the room.

To Joey's delight, however, the figure reclining on the frilly pink bedspread bore no resemblance whatsoever to Freddy Krueger.

"Hi, Joey," said the girl in the skimpy black negligee. "Remember me?"

"Beth Dorsett," whispered Joey, too stunned to contemplate the improbability of it all. Beth had been the subject of Joey's most intense private fantasies ever since junior high school. The fact that she and her fancy friends always made fun of him hadn't deterred him from imagining almost daily what it would be like to hold the exquisite girl in his arms.

"You've changed, Joey," said the girl, rising from the bed and moving toward him. "You're so handsome now. So sexy." Joey swallowed hard and tried not to stare at her lush cleavage. "Don't you like me anymore?" she pouted, the back of her hand softly caressing his reddening cheek. "Don't you want me, Joey? I know I want you."

The bedroom door closed while Joey and Beth embraced, their kisses growing increasingly passionate as the girl plunged her tongue into the boy's open mouth. It took Joey a few seconds to realize that her thick tongue was growing rapidly, snaking deeper and deeper down his throat until he began to gag. He tried to let go, but she held him in an iron grip. Joey began screaming in agony as the serpentine tongue worked its way into his skull, popping out his right eye before

doubling back to push his other eye deep into his hemorrhaging brain.

"You're such a good kisser," Freddy croaked, resuming his own horrible form. Joey toppled over, clutching at his empty eye sockets as he fell onto the dirty red-and-green-striped bedspread. The four posts of the old bed suddenly came to life, four powerful arms grabbing each of Joey's limbs and pulling him taut as a rubber band, suspending him in midair above the stained mattress, his body stretched beyond the breaking point until it snapped in a sickening spray of blood and shattered bone.

Back at Westin Hills, Kirsten Parker had begun to weep uncontrollably.

Chapter 7

"Where are you going?" asked Neil. He had to walk very fast to keep up with Nancy as she strode briskly across the hospital grounds.

"I don't know," she replied honestly. "I just know I can't stay here anymore."

"Because of Dr. Maddalena? I'll straighten that out for you. If I quit every time the Dragon Lady—"

"It's not just her," interrupted Nancy. "There's something going on here that I just can't handle anymore. I thought I could help these kids, but now I'm not so sure I can even help myself."

"I think you've already started to help them," said Neil. "And I have a funny feeling maybe they've started helping you, too."

Nancy stopped and looked at Neil. She swallowed hard. Maybe he was right. Maybe...

Then she remembered Kirsten's bloody arm and everything that had happened since she started working at Westin Hills. No, she was hurting these kids by staying here, and they had already endured more hurt than anyone deserved to endure in a lifetime.

"Give a girl a ride?" said Nancy.

"Where to?"

"The bus station."

Neil looked at her for a long moment and then shrugged his shoulders. She followed him to his car, climbed into the front seat, and fell asleep.

She opened her eyes in time to see Neil pulling up into the driveway of his own house.

"I don't see any Greyhounds," said Nancy.

"I keep 'em in the bedroom," he replied.

Nancy looked at Neil. Then she looked at the house for a moment and smiled.

"Show me," she said.

They lay still in each other's arms for a long time before Nancy broke the silence. "Have you ever thought of suicide?" she asked.

Neil sighed and shook his head. "Am I that lousy in bed?" he asked.

Nancy smiled and kissed him tenderly on the lips. "As a matter of fact, you're incredible in bed. I guess my timing was just a little off."

"Your timing was perfect," said Neil with a big smile.

"You know what I mean." Nancy gave him a playful slap on the arm.

"Do *you* think about suicide a lot?" asked Neil, suddenly turning serious.

Nancy shrugged.

"It's a way out, isn't it?"

"For cowards maybe."

"I don't think it's all that easy. If it were, a lot more people would do it." Nancy paused and gazed thoughtfully at the ceiling. "The only reason I haven't killed myself already is that I have no guarantee he would leave me alone, even if I were dead."

"Who?" asked Neil, taking her face in his hands and turning it toward his.

"The man I told you about," said Nancy.

"Krueger? That's—"

"Crazy?" said Nancy. "You think I'm crazy, don't you?"

"Of course not," said Neil, but his answer came just a second too late.

"Let's go to sleep." Nancy turned her back to Neil and almost immediately fell into a deep sleep.

Nancy awoke moments later to the sound of a dripping faucet. She slipped out of bed and followed the sound to the bathroom.

The faucet was dripping blood, and the basin was already filled with the scarlet liquid.

Nancy closed the faucet and became aware of a louder dripping behind her. She turned and saw that the bathtub too was filled with blood that continued to spurt in thick globs from the faucet. She stepped forward to shut the leak and saw the faces in the shower curtain.

"Help us," they moaned. Nancy stared in horror at the faces of Philip and Jennifer, their dead eyes staring at her from somewhere beyond the thick white vinyl, their bloody faces pressed tight against the heavy fabric.

"Kill him, Nancy," they chanted in unison. "Kill him before he kills us all!"

"We've got his claws," said Nancy, desperate to believe that her terrible work was finally done.

"Use them," said the voices. "Kill him by his own hand."

She was about to speak when the curtain began to move, the curtain hooks making a horrible screeching sound as they scraped against the metal rod. It wasn't until she saw the bloody, clawed hand emerge from behind the curtain that Nancy began to scream.

"What's wrong?" asked Neil, shaking her roughly by the shoulders as she sat up beside him in bed. Nancy's eyes snapped open. She stared in horror at the closed bathroom door, her heart pounding violently in her chest.

"I have to go to the hospital right away," said Nancy, certain now that she would never leave this place until the job she had begun on Elm Street was finally completed.

"I can't believe what you're telling me," said Neil, following Nancy down the corridor to Dr. Maddalena's office. "You're not talking about dreaming as any sane person knows it."

"I'm talking about the dream as reality," said Nancy. "Dreams that you can touch, taste, feel, and even be killed in!"

"That sounds like bullshit to me," said Neil.

"Tell it to Philip and Jennifer," said Nancy.

"But they're..." Neil stopped in mid-sentence.

"Now open the door."

Neil looked at the door to Dr. Maddalena's office and shook his head. "This is crazy," he said. "Do you know she's already thinking of filing criminal charges against you?"

"She stole something from me, and I want it back. Now open the door."

Neil hesitated for a moment and then unlocked the door with his master key. He stood guard outside while Nancy rifled the desk drawers.

"They've got to be here," she muttered, carelessly tossing aside books and papers as she searched for the deadly claw.

Then she noticed the wall safe, its door slightly ajar. She crossed the room and threw open the door.

Joey's head stared back at her, his eyes wide and glassy.

"He got them back," said Joey as Nancy began to scream.

Neil rushed to the safe and saw only a slight smear of blood. He turned around and saw Nancy racing down the hall toward the Group Therapy Room.

Nancy peeked into the room and saw that Dr. Maddalena was leading the session herself. It was clear from the expression on her face that she was getting nowhere fast.

"Kincaid," said Dr. Maddalena, singling out the boy whom she perceived as being the closest thing this motley group of disturbed adolescents had to a leader. "Why don't you tell us what's been happening these past few days?"

"Why don't you eat shit and die?" suggested Kincaid.

Dr. Maddalena stared at him for a long moment and decided to try a different approach. Perhaps, she thought, one of the less aggressive children would be more inclined to cooperate.

"Taryn?" The girl just shrugged and shook her head slowly from side to side.

"Laredo?"

Silence.

"Anyone?" said Dr. Maddalena in a tone of voice that clearly betrayed her mounting irritation. "Well," she said, rising to her feet after a few painfully long seconds, "if you'll excuse me, I believe I can find more constructive uses for my time." Nancy ducked into an open doorway as Dr. Maddalena stormed down the hall.

Every face in the room lit up when Nancy walked in a moment later.

"Welcome back," said Kincaid, a big grin on his face.

"I knew you wouldn't leave us," said Kirsten, jumping from her seat to embrace her friend. The others followed Kirsten's lead, and soon they were all crowding around Nancy, their faces glowing with renewed hope. She waited until they calmed down and then stepped back to speak.

"It's time for the final battle," said Nancy, sounding very much like a general addressing the troops.

"Just tell us what to do," said Kincaid. Nancy smiled at the boy and nodded. For once, Dr. Maddalena's instincts had been right: If Kincaid cooperated, the others would follow. Ultimately, however, Nancy's secret weapon was Kirsten Parker. Nancy herself was the seasoned veteran in this campaign, but Kirsten alone held the power needed to stop the enemy dead in his tracks.

"Come with me," said Nancy, holding out her hands as she lay down in the center of the floor. One by one, the others joined her, their heads in the center and their arms linked to form a star.

At that moment, Neil Guiness appeared in the doorway.

"Neil?" said Nancy, extending a hand in invitation.

"I..." Neil stopped, not knowing what to say or do. He looked out into the hall, imagining what Dr. Maddalena would say if she walked in and found him lying on the floor with Nancy and the kids. Then he looked at Nancy—so sure of herself, so confident that what she was doing wasn't so crazy as it appeared to be.

I love this crazy lady, he thought, suddenly tempted to follow her lead despite all his professional instincts to the contrary. Maybe Nancy was crazy as a loon, but she seemed to share some fundamental understanding with these kids that had continued to elude him despite his persistent effort to get through to them. If Nancy had some way, however unorthodox, of helping them work out whatever it was that was troubling them, Neil very much wanted to be a part of it.

But now, as he gazed into Nancy's eyes, he saw an intensity of purpose and vision that was truly terrifying. Wherever she was headed with these kids, Neil was not yet ready to go.

Slowly, he shook his head no.

Nancy nodded once and took a deep breath. "Kirsten," she said, forcing herself to dismiss Neil Guinness from her thoughts.

Kirsten nodded and closed her eyes. Ten seconds later, she was fast asleep.

Neil watched and allowed himself a slight smile. *So that's what this is all about*, he thought. He had seen plenty of group meditations in his time and hadn't been impressed.

What he had never seen before was five people disappear before his astonished eyes.

It was, he had to admit, damned impressive.

And then they were on Elm Street, standing before the house they had all seen before in their worst nightmares.

"This is it," said Nancy, feeling an exhilarating sense of power. "This is where he was born, and this is where he has to die."

"What's the plan?" asked Kirsten.

"We move in fast," said Nancy. "We find the son of a bitch, and we take his weapon."

"And then?" asked Taryn.

"Then we kill the motherfucker with his own fucking claws," said Kincaid.

"Let's go," said Nancy, stepping up onto the porch. "And don't forget—stay together!"

Taryn was the last to enter the house. I wasn't that she was any more afraid than the others—indeed, Taryn was as eager as any of them to get the great battle under way—it was just her way to fall back and let others lead. All her life, she had thought of herself as a follower. Her loyalty and courage were beyond reproach. Given a good cause, Taryn always believed she would follow a strong leader into the gates of hell itself.

And now she had.

Taryn was about to follow the others up the narrow staircase when she heard a familiar voice.

"Sugar baby?"

She stopped and turned around.

"Grandma?" Unnoticed by the others, Taryn strayed from the group and entered a small room that she had somehow overlooked before. A picture in an old-fashioned frame hung on the wall. Taryn crossed the room and smiled. She had always loved that old photograph of herself as a baby cradled in the strong arms of her loving grandmother.

But what in the world was that picture doing...?

"Sugar baby?"

Taryn whirled around to see her grandmother sitting in the big rocker she always sat in when she was alive.

"Grandma!" said Taryn, instinctively rushing into the old woman's loving arms.

"I'm so glad you've come back," said the old woman, one strong arm around Taryn's waist while the other caressed her soft hair. "We were all so worried when you ran away."

"I didn't run away, Grandma. I had these dreams, and then... I had to go to the hospital."

"I missed you so much," said the woman in the rocking chair as she tightened her grip on the girl's narrow waist.

"Don't worry, Grandma," said Taryn, feeling at peace for the first time in many months. "I'm never going to leave you again."

"You can bet your sweet ass on that," croaked Freddy Krueger, rocking contentedly as his gleaming blades sliced smoothly across the girl's screaming face.

Chapter 8

In another reality, Neil Guiness lay in bed with his clothes on and turned off the light.

"This is crazy," he said aloud as he took a series of slow deep breaths and tried to will himself to sleep.

Neil pictured the old house on Elm Street in his mind, forcing the image of the abandoned house to stay uppermost in his consciousness even as he began to think about what he had seen at the hospital that day.

People don't just disappear. That's what Dr. Maddalena said, and for once, of course, she was right.

Still, he had been there. He had seen... what?

Maybe it had been a dream. Maybe this whole crazy thing was a dream. Maybe there was no Nancy Thompson, except in his fevered imagination. And maybe there was no Dr. Maddalena and no Westin Hills Psychiatric Hospital either.

For that matter, maybe there was no Neil Guiness.

Neil took another deep breath and forced his mind's eye to return to the old house on Elm Street.

A line from Shakespeare drifted through his consciousness as he surrendered to the sweet drowsiness that was finally overtaking him.

For in that sleep of death, what dreams may come...

And then he was there.

Neil stepped up onto the porch and knocked on the door.

"Nancy?"

He opened the door and was instantly enshrouded in a thick, bluish fog.

"Nancy?" he repeated. Cautiously, Neil stepped into the room. There was a mirror on the wall. Neil looked at his reflection and then took hold of his right cheek. Slowly, he stretched it like taffy at arm's length, a grin of sheer delight on his distorted face.

"I'm in," he whispered in awe as his face resumed its normal shape. "I'm in the dreamworld!"

Suddenly, he heard a crashing noise from somewhere farther back in the house. He walked through the door at the end of the room and found himself submerged in total darkness.

In another part of the house, Nancy searched for her missing comrades. "Taryn?" she called. "Kincaid? Laredo?"

And then she saw him.

"Miss your little friends?" he rasped, a crooked smile on his ugly face.

"You son of a bitch!" she screamed, somehow knowing in that instant that Taryn was dead.

Freddy laughed, raised his bladed glove, and took one menacing step forward. Nancy ducked as he swung out at her and ran from the room as fast as she could with Freddy always just a few steps behind. She ran through doorway after doorway down a seemingly endless maze of dimly lit corridors before suddenly crashing into someone in the darkness.

"Neil! What are you doing here?" she asked, more annoyed than relieved by his presence. Maybe she loved him, but this wasn't the world in which their love belonged. Nancy knew there were dangers here that Neil had literally never dreamed of before.

"I had to come," he said, his voice trembling with excitement. "Don't you understand what this means? I've been studying the dream state from the outside for years, and now I'm actually on the inside looking in! This is going to make one hell of a paper!"

"You have to get out," said Nancy, shaking her head frantically from side to side. "You're in serious danger here."

"This is fantastic," said Neil, his entire body seeming to vibrate in tune to some unseen force. "It's kind of like... it's kind of like being inside some kind of incredible television!"

"Stay tuned," said Nancy, "because you're about to see something you've never seen on TV."

And then Freddy appeared, twice as large as life with his gleaming blades raised high for the kill.

"Is there a doctor in the house?" he asked. Nancy grabbed Neil's hand and pulled him out of the room.

"Let's get out of here!" gasped Neil as they raced down a crooked corridor that seemed to get narrower and narrower the faster they ran.

"Your dream or mine?" asked Nancy, looking back to see Freddy gaining on them fast. She pulled Neil through the first open door she saw and almost tripped over the dismembered remains of Taryn and Joey.

Nancy watched in grim silence as Neil turned away and vomited violently in the corner of the room.

Laredo had lost the others around the corner of one of the countless meandering hallways they had been wandering since setting foot in the house.

No matter.

More than any of the others, Laredo felt at home in the world of dreams. Here at last was the ultimate manifestation of Dungeons and Dragons, with no dice or computer program standing between the player and his wily opponent. This time, the sword in Laredo's hand was a real one, forged from his own vivid imaginings. Laredo had never handled a real sword before, but he knew as soon as he grasped the heavy hilt that this was the weapon he was born to wield.

Cautiously, Laredo proceeded down a slippery staircase, ever aware that the devil can assume many forms. If his years of game-playing had taught him anything, it was that underestimating your opponent's strength was the quickest route to defeat.

"Rado?"

Laredo whirled around, his eyes bright and his sword held high.

"It's me, Rado. It's your brother Toby."

The boy in the green-and-red-striped bathing suit couldn't have been more than seven years old.

"You're not Toby," said Laredo, the sword shaking visibly in his hand. "Toby's dead."

"You were supposed to keep an eye on me in the pool," said the boy. "If you hadn't answered the phone, I'd still be alive."

"I was only gone for a second," said Laredo, his voice trembling almost imperceptibly.

"A second was all I needed to drown."

"I'm sorry," whispered Laredo. How often had he wished he had never gone off to answer the telephone that terrible day! It was after Toby died that he had begun to immerse himself in the world of fantasy. And then the dreams began...

"Hold me, Rado," said the boy, extending his thin arms. "Hold me, and everything will be all right."

Laredo paused, took a deep breath, and stepped forward. Suddenly, his foot lashed out, landing squarely in the boy's crotch. Roaring with pain, Freddy Krueger lurched back and crashed into the wall behind him.

"You didn't think I'd fall for the old shape-changing trick, did you?" asked Laredo, a triumphant smile on his face. "We dream warriors are too clever for that." Laredo paused as the implications of being a dream warrior slowly dawned on him. "All right," he said, mustering his concentration, "let's try playing by your rules for a while."

And then, before Freddy's eyes, the boy tossed aside his sword and metamorphosed into a fierce dragon with powerful claws and gleaming yellow eyes. Immediately, Freddy turned himself into a large black crow, flapping quickly out of reach just as a tongue of flame shot out of the dragon's mouth, incinerating a nearby table. No sooner had the crow attacked the dragon's eyes with its sharp beak and claws than the serpent disappeared, only to be replaced by a huge red net that flung itself in the air and trapped the flapping bird. But then the bird was gone, and in its place was an oozing blob of protoplasm that quickly seeped through the close-knit mesh.

And then the blob disappeared, and Laredo resumed his normal form, poised for his opponent's next attack.

But nothing happened.

Freddy was gone.

"I've won," Laredo whispered, hardly able to believe his own success. He took a deep, calming breath and closed his eyes for just a second.

But a second was all it took for Laredo's sword to fly up from the floor and pierce him through the heart. Suddenly, the floor opened up beneath his feet and Laredo was sucked into a whirlpool of flames that instantly scorched his flesh to the bone, the floor itself laughing in triumph as the boy sank deeper and deeper into the all-consuming hellfire.

And then there were four.

No one spoke for a long time as Nancy and Neil and Kirsten and Kincaid faced each other in the living room of the old house on Elm Street.

"Some dream warriors we turned out to be," said Kincaid at last.

"We're alive, aren't we?" said Kirsten.

"And so is he," said Nancy.

"Whatever he is," muttered Neil, heading for the front door.

Suddenly, the door slammed shut and the lights went off. Somebody screamed, and then the room was illuminated by an eerie green light.

Freddy Krueger stood in the middle of the room, his talon-tipped hand extended in an obscene gesture of greeting.

"Welcome, my children," he croaked.

"Fuck you," said Kincaid, spitting squarely into Freddy's right eye. As Freddy stepped back and wiped the thick glob of saliva from his face, Kincaid kicked him hard in the stomach and sent the startled creature crashing into the far wall.

"Let's get out of here," shouted Nancy, knowing that the four of them were not powerful enough to snatch the demon's claws.

"Where do we go?" asked Kirsten.

"It's up to you!" said Nancy. "You pulled us *into* your dream. Now you have to pull us *out*!"

"What do I do?" asked the girl as Freddy slowly staggered to his feet.

"Concentrate!" shouted Nancy. "Think of the place you know best and take us there. Now!"

Kirsten looked into Nancy's eyes and nodded her head. She closed her eyes just as Freddy's claw lashed wildly through the thin air.

There was a party going on at the Parker house.

Undeniably the social event of the year, according to the local society columnist. *Anyone who is anyone will be there.*

Mrs. Parker was pleased. Even Jack Webster, the elusive thespian who was rarely seen anywhere except onstage, had promised to put in a brief appearance. This was going to be the party that everyone at the country club would be talking about for a long time to come.

Mrs. Parker was about to have a sharp word with an idle waiter when the telephone rang.

"No, Dr. Maddalena," said Mrs. Parker, more than a little annoyed that the woman had dared to call in the middle of her soirée, "I haven't seen Kirsten... Yes, I understand there's been some trouble over there... Quite frankly, Doctor, I would say that this is your problem and not mine. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have guests to attend to."

She hung up the phone and returned to the living room. The waiter was now standing alone in the corner of the room, resting his tray on Mrs. Parker's favorite Chippendale chair and fingering the gilt frame on her recently acquired Monet.

Or was it Manet? Mrs. Parker could never remember. In either case, it was extremely valuable, and the lazy clod was going to pay dearly for his impudence.

Mrs. Parker was about to speak severely to the young man when Kirsten, Nancy, Neil, and Kincaid appeared out of nowhere and crashed into the center of the crowded buffet table.

Nancy scrambled to her feet and checked out her companions. Everyone seemed to be all right except for a few minor scrapes and bruises. Kincaid had already snatched a handful of shrimp from a broken dish on the floor and was studying the house and its well-dressed occupants with admiring eyes.

"Some party!" he said.

"Just what do you people think you're doing?" asked Mrs. Parker, turning around just in time to see Kirsten carefully stepping out of her mother's finest punch bowl. "You'll lose your license for this, young man," she said, pointing an accusing finger at Neil.

"Mother..." Kirsten began.

"I'll deal with you later, young lady," said Mrs. Parker. "Please go to your room immediately."

"Too late," said Nancy as the floor began to tremble.

And then the room itself seemed to explode as Freddy erupted violently from the center of the floor with a scream of rage.

Immediately, Mrs. Parker stepped forward to chastise her uninvited guest.

"Just who do you think...?"

Before she could finish her question, however, Freddy lashed out and slashed the woman across the stomach. As Mrs. Parker looked down in horror at her exposed bowels, Freddy plunged his head into the woman's midsection and began to devour her still-throbbing viscera.

"Next course!" croaked Freddy, blood and guts dripping from his chin.

Nancy grabbed Kirsten and literally dragged her out of the room, Neil and Kincaid following close behind.

"It's just a dream," Nancy assured the hysterical girl, although she knew perfectly well that they no longer dwelled in the world of dreams. What was done from here on in could not be undone. There would be time later for Kirsten to mourn her mother as Nancy had once mourned hers. For now, there were battles to be fought and powerful enemies to be vanquished. At least they had finally lured the demon onto their own turf.

Nancy was beginning to wonder if that hadn't been a terrible mistake.

As Nancy and her friends fled, Freddy followed close behind, slashing wildly at the frantic guests, leaving a trail of gore in his wake. Kirsten had taken the lead now, steering the others around the corner and into her father's trophy room.

"Holy shit!" said Kincaid, looking around in amazement as Kirsten locked the door behind them. One wall of the den was lined with mounted animal heads, souvenirs of Mr. Parker's many hunting trips to the African plains. On the opposite wall was a case containing more guns than Kincaid had seen in all his years on the mean streets of the inner city.

"Give me the key," demanded Kincaid.

"I don't know where he keeps it," said Kirsten.

"Damn!" Kincaid started rummaging wildly through the metal cabinet next to the window. Meanwhile, Nancy had walked over to the glass-encased gun rack and tried the door.

"It's not locked," she said, swinging open the door.

"Daddy must have been showing his collection to one of the guests," said Kirsten.

Kincaid brushed past the girl, took a vintage submachine gun out of the case, and held it lovingly in his arms.

"Be careful," said Neil. "That thing might be loaded."

"It probably doesn't even have a firing pin," said Kincaid.

Just then, Freddy's metal claw ripped through the wooden door. Kincaid wheeled around, aimed the weapon, and squeezed the trigger. The door exploded in a blizzard of wood chips as the volley of bullets sent Freddy flying back into the hallway.

"Let's get out of here," said Nancy, knowing perfectly well that it was going to take more than bullets to stop Freddy Krueger.

"Where are we going?" asked Kirsten.

"You're the driver," said Nancy. "Everybody link hands."

Neil looked annoyed. "This is no time for—"

"Tell it to him!" said Nancy. Neil looked at the enraged creature crashing through the splintered wooden door and quickly joined the circle. "Get us out of here, Kirsten!"

"I'm scared," said the girl.

"Concentrate!"

Kirsten closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

Then the door caved in, and a bloody Fred Krueger clawed madly at the air where a moment before had stood the four remaining dream warriors.

Chapter 9

It had been a very long week for Dr. Maddalena.

First Kirsten Parker tried to kill herself. Then that strange Thompson girl came around and started stirring up trouble; those nice children Philip and Jennifer had their dreadful accidents; and that awful Kincaid became even more abusive than usual. And just when things seemed about as bad as they could be, the entire lot of them disappears and Neil Guiness swears that he saw them vanish in front of his eyes.

And now Dr. Guiness himself was missing.

Dr. Maddalena had worked long and hard to establish herself and her hospital in the community, and she wasn't about to see all her hard work go down the drain just because Neil Guiness had the hots for some little tramp like Nancy Thompson. Still, if Guiness and the kids didn't show up soon, she would have no choice but to call in the police. As much as she wanted to avoid a scandal, Dr. Maddalena almost hoped that Neil Guiness would turn out to be responsible for all this so she could have the distinct personal pleasure of sending his highly respected ass to jail.

And as she savored that thought, a square hole in space suddenly opened up in the middle of the room and Neil, Nancy, and Kirsten tumbled through.

"Where's Kincaid?" asked Nancy, ignoring the flustered Dr. Maddalena.

"Help me!"

They all turned to see Kincaid stuck exactly halfway through the square, one half of his body in the hospital and the other half back at Kirsten's house.

"He's coming!" the boy shouted. "Get me out of here! Please!"

"Come on!" yelled Nancy. Neil and Kirsten joined her in pulling on Kincaid's arm and leg. "You too!" ordered Nancy, turning to Dr. Maddalena. The older woman hesitated for just a moment and then joined the others.

"He's got my leg!" screamed Kincaid, twitching wildly. "Do something! Please!"

"Concentrate, Kirsten," gasped Nancy. "Pull him in!"

"I'm trying!" said Kirsten. "It's just not working!"

And then Kincaid began to scream, first like a person in great pain and then like nothing human anyone had ever heard. Kirsten was crying now, and even Dr. Maddalena was feeling something vaguely akin to compassion. They watched helplessly as the blood began to spurt from somewhere behind the square, four razor-sharp blades poking through and slowly working their way up the screaming boy's body. Then the blades reached his throat and the screaming abruptly stopped. Everyone stepped back as one side of Kincaid's body, raggedly sheared down the center, slid down the square like a specimen squirming on a lab slide before crashing to the floor.

It was Dr. Maddalena who began to scream now as the head and torso of Freddy Krueger pushed through the strange hole in the fabric of reality. Freddy's mad laughter was the last sound she heard before the creature lashed out with his bloody claw and neatly sliced her head off.

"Are we dreaming or awake?" asked Neil, gasping for breath as he followed the fleeing Nancy and Kirsten out into the hospital corridor.

"There's no difference anymore!" shouted Nancy, desperately searching for an escape route.

Then, at the end of the hallway, she saw a door she had never noticed before. Without hesitation, she flung it open and began racing down the long flight of stairs that lay behind. The others followed, running as fast as they could, Freddy's claw scraping horribly along the metal railing a few steps behind.

After what seemed like hours of endless running, the breathless warriors arrived at a weathered wooden door. Nancy opened the door and pushed Neil and Kirsten inside. No sooner had she slammed it shut behind them than Freddy's claw ripped through from the other side.

"We're back on Elm Street," said Kirsten calmly, her capacity for surprise long ago used up.

Nancy looked around and saw that the upper level of the old house was a sea of flames. She turned back to the door just as Freddy burst through.

Suddenly Neil stepped forward, bravely positioning himself between Freddy and the girls.

The brilliant young Dr. Guiness had a plan.

"Get out of here!" he shouted to the surprised-looking creature. "This is my dream, you ugly son of a bitch. Nobody comes in here without my permission. Understand? Nobody!"

Freddy stopped and stared at Neil in amazement.

"You're crazier than I am," he said, lashing out with his left arm and flicking Neil aside like a pesty mosquito. Neil crashed into the opposite wall and lay unconscious on the floor.

"And now, my darlings..." said Freddy, grinning wickedly at the girls as he beckoned to them with his glistening talons.

Nancy and Kirsten looked around and saw no way out.

"Coal chute," whispered Nancy.

Kirsten gave her a puzzled look and then closed her eyes.

Nancy turned around and saw the open coal chute appear on the wall behind them. Without hesitating, she grabbed the younger girl's hand and pulled her through.

The chute twisted and wound in the darkness as the two girls plummeted ever downward, landing at last on a pile of filthy rags.

Even before she opened her eyes, Nancy felt the steamy air and heard the relentless pounding of the machinery.

"We're in his boiler room," she said. "This is where all the killing began."

And this is where it will all end, she added to herself.

Suddenly Freddy popped out from behind the surging furnace. "Welcome home, Nancy," he rasped.

Grabbing a large pipe wrench, Kirsten unhesitantly stepped between Freddy and her friend. Freddy just laughed and knocked the heavy tool out of her hand with a swipe of his gloved fist. He took a step forward and licked his blackened lips as if better to savor his long-awaited triumph.

And then Nancy remembered a lesson she had learned long ago.

"We're doing this all wrong," she said, turning to Kirsten with a slight smile on her face. "You can't fight the demon with fear and anger."

"Shut up," said Freddy, glaring furiously at Nancy.

"Krueger feeds on hatred," she continued. "He always has. It's the terror he creates in all of us that's let him live as long as he has."

"I'm warning you," said the creature as Nancy turned her puzzled friend 180 degrees.

"What are you doing?" asked Kirsten.

"The only way to fight a monster like Freddy is to turn your back on him. Together, we can take away the evil energy he feeds on."

Freddy backed off, a look of genuine fear on his twisted features as Nancy began to chant.

"Freddy is nothing. Freddy is nothing."

Black smoke began to rise from Freddy's charred flesh as Kirsten picked up the chant. He stood paralyzed in one spot as the girls began to adapt their short refrain to a simple childlike tune. Nancy began to smile, almost relaxing as she started to wonder what all the fuss had been about in the first place.

And then, with a cry of anguish, Krueger burst into flames, running aimlessly around the vast room as the girls ducked for cover behind a massive boiler.

Kirsten peeked out and saw...

Nothing.

"Is he—?"

"I don't know," said Nancy. She stepped out and looked around.

On the floor was a single glistening steel blade.

She picked it up and grasped it tightly in her clenched fist.

"Nancy?" called a tired male voice.

Nancy looked into the darkness and saw...

"Neil!"

Nancy ran toward the man in the mist. She wanted so much to believe that the nightmare was over at last. The man extended his arms, and Nancy moved closer. It would be so wonderful if it were true, if this man who looked and sounded and acted like her beloved Neil were really who he claimed to be.

If only wishes could come true.

Nancy waited until she was in the man's arms and then plunged the steel blade deep into his chest.

"Die, you son of a bitch," said Nancy, pulling off Freddy's mask as he swept upward with his carefully concealed glove, trying to pull away even as Nancy tightened her death grip, twisting the creature's own blade deeper and deeper into his heart.

And then she felt his blades enter her chest, and she knew that only a few moments were left for her to do what needed to be done. Ignoring her own terrible pain, Nancy pulled the blades out of her chest and wrenched the dreadful glove off Freddy's burnt and withered hand. With a cry of triumph, she tossed the bloody weapon to Kirsten.

Without a moment's hesitation, Kirsten slipped the glove onto her own right hand. Immediately, she felt a power unlike anything she had known before. With a scream of rage, she rushed at the demon of her nightmares and slashed his throat from ear to ear with his own razor-sharp blades.

And then, to be sure, Kirsten pulled off the glove and plunged the blades directly into the creature's merciless heart.

Freddy screamed and collapsed to the floor, his image seeming to flicker on and off like the picture on a poorly tuned TV. Kirsten freed Nancy from the demon's embrace and pulled her away from the rapidly fading creature.

"He's dying," whispered Nancy. Kirsten cradled her in her arms. "His house is burning, and his energy is almost gone. The nightmare is over."

"Don't talk," said Kirsten, holding her tighter. She could hardly see Freddy now as she peered into the darkness. Nancy pulled her closer and whispered one last request in her ear.

"Don't worry," said Kirsten, nodding her head in agreement as tears filled her eyes, "I won't let you die. I'm going to dream you into a beautiful dream forever."

Both girls closed their eyes. Nancy smiled a smile for great peace and slowly began to fade away.

When Kirsten opened her eyes, she was alone.

Kirsten stood up and walked slowly to the spot on which Freddy Krueger had stood a few short moments ago. On the floor were a pile of ashes and four razor-sharp blades.

Kirsten wrapped the blades in a dirty rag and slipped them into her jacket pocket.

And then she was back in the basement of the burning house. Neil lay unconscious on the floor. Calmly, Kirsten threw open the cellar doors to let in the crisp, clean evening air. With greater strength than she had ever known before, Kirsten dragged Neil up the stairs and into the clear, starry night.

Chapter 10

Spring came early the following year.

The epidemic of teenage suicides had come to an abrupt halt, and many people naïvely credited the change in climate with having contributed to the sudden upswing in the spirit of the local young people. The new staff at Westin Hills kept silent, pleased by the turn of events but unwilling to put forth any theory of their own.

Neil Guiness and Kirsten Parker, meeting together for the first time in many months, carefully avoided the subject as well.

"I'm glad everything worked out for you," said Neil, sitting across from Kirsten at his dining room table.

"I think New York was just what I needed," the girl replied. "So many people. I never have to feel alone. Besides, I really needed to get away for a while after..." She hesitated, still not ready to put into words the unbelievable events of the previous year. "After what happened." She concluded.

"I know what you mean," said Neil, who had not seen any patients since the day Nancy died. He had tried writing a paper on the long chain of events that had led to her death, but he knew even before he began that no reputable journal would ever publish "A Nightmare on Elm Street."

Perhaps it's better that way, he thought.

Perhaps the world was not yet ready for the true story of Freddy Krueger.

There was a long pause in the conversation, and then Kirsten asked the question she had been waiting all evening to ask.

"Do you two still see each other?"

Neil reddened slightly and smiled. "I've been meaning to thank you for that," he said. "As a matter of fact, I'm seeing her tonight."

"Say hi for me, okay?" said Kirsten as she rose to leave.

"I'll do that," said Neil, now more eager than ever to get to sleep and meet once again with the girl of his dreams.

Kirsten was walking toward the front door when she noticed the model house on Neil's mantel.

"They were going to throw it out," he explained with a shrug. "I decided to save it as sort of a souvenir."

Kirsten studied the model for just a moment and then turned away with a grim smile.

"Well, good night," she said, kissing Neil on the cheek as the two surviving dream warriors fondly embraced.

"Good night, Kirsten. I hope you'll visit again soon."

"I will," she said. "Sweet dreams."

"Thanks to you," he said. He watched her walk down the porch steps and then closed the door behind her. Alone again, he turned off the downstairs light and climbed the stairs to the bedroom.

Soon Neil would be fast asleep, expecting momentarily to step into Nancy's warm and loving embrace.

He never noticed the light blinking on in the window of the tiny house on the mantel or heard the faint scraping of steel against steel in the miniature boiler room below.

The Life and Death of Freddy Krueger

Freddy Krueger was born amidst a raging fire in the old insane asylum on Elm Street, the bastard son of a beautiful young schizophrenic who died alone and unattended in the agony of childbirth. In later years, Freddy would distinctly remember his mother's screams of pain as the first sounds he ever heard.

Raised from infancy by a succession of ax murderers, rapists, and arsonists, young Freddy was adopted at an early age by a lonely old pimp who hoped that the strange-looking boy might someday make himself useful by luring curious drunks into the filthy alley in which his disease-ridden whores earned their meager pay. Whenever the old man would catch his adopted son enjoying the services of one of his employees, he would express his displeasure by beating the boy almost to the point of unconsciousness with a razor strop. It did not take young Freddy long to begin associating sexual pleasure with the infliction of pain.

Occasionally, the old man would punish Freddy for some imaginary offense by drawing blood from his belly with a straight razor. Refusing to cry out loud no matter how badly his sadistic father slashed him, the boy began to take a perverse sort of pleasure in fingering the narrow scars that soon covered the front of his body.

As a young man, Freddy showed no more aptitude as a pimp than the old man showed as a father. Finding the boy to be of no practical use, the old pimp paid no attention to him whatsoever except when doling out his daily punishment. After a while, Freddy began almost to welcome the beatings, which were the only expression of parental interest he was ever to know. Freddy finally decided to run away after being savagely beaten by his father and left for dead in the alley. Before he left, Freddy used the money he found in the old man's strongbox to hire a professional arsonist to torch his house while the old pimp slept peacefully upstairs.

Freddy never bothered to find out whether the old man survived the blaze.

With no formal schooling and no particular skills or aptitudes, Freddy wandered from town to town doing odd jobs and getting into trouble with the law. He began to drink heavily and spent many nights sleeping in the gutter. Freddy was sleeping in an alley near the local schoolhouse when a group of young boys decided to try picking the drunk's pockets. One boy's hand was still in his pocket when Freddy awoke in a drunken rage and lashed out wildly with the bottle of gin clenched in his hand. The bottle landed on the boy's head with a loud crash as his four companions fled in terror. Freddy watched the boys run away and then looked thoughtfully at the child who was bleeding to death beside him in the alley. *They're scared of me*, he thought, strangely exhilarated as never before by the unfamiliar feeling of power that surged through his body like a shot of adrenaline.

Freddy carried the bleeding boy to a deserted cellar and studied his figure for a long time. *Children are useless*, he thought, repeating a sentiment he had often heard muttered by the old man who raised him. *Children are better off dead*, he thought, improvising freely on the theme. He reached into his pocket and took out the straight razor he had taken from the old man's closet before leaving home. Freddy roughly tore off the boy's clothing and studied his smooth white belly for a moment. Then, recalling the four boys who escaped, Freddy cut four deep incisions into the boy's flesh. He watched for a while as the blood spurted out, his face flushed with triumph. For the first time in his life, Freddy Krueger was in control. It was a feeling he did not want to live without ever again.

Freddy continued his nomadic existence until he arrived at the suburban community of Springwood. There was something about Springwood that instantly outraged him. Perhaps it was the well-cared-for lawns and lovely tree-lined streets that were so much more beautiful than anything he had even dreamed of as a child. Or perhaps it was the carefree children of Springwood so blissfully unaware of the suffering and anguish of the real world. Suddenly,

Freddy knew his calling in life. He would teach these smug suburbanites and their children what the world was really all about.

He would teach them the true meaning of pain.

For the first time in his life, Freddy looked for a regular job, and he soon found one maintaining the boiler in the old generating plant on the outskirts of town. The work was easy enough, and it left Freddy with plenty of time to devote to his true calling. He soon decided that his old straight razor was insufficient to do the holy work that needed to be done. Freddy spent many hours in the machine shop, forging the deadly tool he would need to carry out his mission. These were among the happiest hours of his life—designing and then building the special glove with its four deadly fingerblades. Carefully, with a feeling akin to love, Freddy cut the gleaming metal, honing it to a fine, razor-sharp edge and then fitting the assembled apparatus into the fingerless leather glove. Then, when it was finally done, he took a deep breath and slipped the deadly talons onto his hand.

A perfect fit!

And now it was time to put his creation to the test.

The next day, Freddy slipped into his comfortable red and green sweater, donned his crumpled fedora, climbed into the front seat of his battered Chevy van, and drove into town. Lovingly, he clicked the blades that gleamed so beautifully on his right hand and waited patiently in the alley adjacent to Springwood Elementary School. He felt his muscles tense with excitement as the bell rang, announcing the end of another school day. For a fleeting moment, Freddy wondered what it would have been like to have gone to school with other children, to have had friends and to have played the innocent games of childhood. For that one brief moment, Freddy wondered if it might not be terribly wrong to interfere with the normal development of a child, to cut off at its very beginnings a human life of almost infinite possibilities and potentialities.

Then he saw the children, laughing and skipping as they rushed into their parents' loving arms, and Freddy knew what he had to do.

There was a little girl standing at the curb not far from the alley. Perhaps her mother had had difficulty starting the car or maybe a long line at the supermarket had set her schedule back a few

minutes. No matter. The little girl was very much alone, and Freddy felt a stirring deep in his wicked soul. Squinting into the sunlight, he read the name "Amy" written in bright pink letters on the girl's lunchbox.

"Amy?" he whispered, but the girl didn't seem to hear him. "Amy," he repeated, a little louder this time. The girl looked at him with her large blue eyes.

"Come here," he said, beckoning to the girl with his left hand. She looked away for a moment, glancing up the street as if expecting her mother to arrive at any moment. Then she looked back at Freddy and he knew in that instant that he had won.

"Come here," he repeated. The girl hesitated for only a moment and then stepped into the alley.

"Who are you?" she asked in a small, sweet voice that set Freddy's teeth on edge.

"Uncle Freddy," he replied, liking the sound of it. "Your mother said I should bring you home."

The girl shook her head doubtfully.

"I don't have an Uncle Freddy," she said.

"You do now," said Freddy, raising his right hand high into the air. Then he brought it down, his temples pounding as his left hand covered the child's mouth and his right tore four deadly gashes in her soft belly. Freddy looked at the bloodied glove for a moment and felt joy deep in his soul. How easily the little one had died! He lifted the girl's bloody body and carried it quickly to his parked van, feeling more alive than he had ever felt before. He stashed the body under some blankets in the back of the van and drove to the power plant. There he unloaded the body and hid it in a large unused storage locker in the back of the boiler room. Then he sat back and breathed deeply of the hot, stifling boiler room air that he had learned to love.

At last, Freddy's life had meaning.

After that, Freddy found it easy to fulfill his self-proclaimed destiny. His methods of abduction varied, but the result was always the same. He loved to see the newspaper accounts of the kidnapping, but it troubled him that no one knew for certain whether the missing children were dead. He began leaving puddles of blood at the murder

sites so that everyone would know that these were not mere kidnappings. It was important to him that the smug parents of Springwood know that their children were being carefully and methodically butchered.

Freddy soon learned that leaving evidence around was not the wisest course for a murderer to pursue. One morning, a small squadron of police led by the intrepid Lieutenant Thompson burst into the power plant and found the rotting bodies of the town's murdered children. Freddy was arrested and brought to trial amid great publicity. Fortunately for Freddy, however, the public defender who handled the case was extremely thorough in his preparation. He examined the search warrant that had gained the police admittance to the power plant the day they arrested Freddy and found a technical error in the wording of the document. The search was ruled illegal, and the case against Freddy was thrown out of court. Despite public outcry, the Springwood Slasher was set free.

It was time to move on, and Freddy knew it. There would be other towns and other children. Next time, Freddy vowed, he would not be so easy to catch.

That night, Freddy packed his meager belongings into the back of his van and settled in for one last night's sleep before hitting the road. He had just settled into a cozy corner of the boiler room with a bottle of his favorite gin when he heard the commotion outside. The angry people of Springwood, led by Lt. Don Thompson and his wife Marge, had decided to take the law into their own hands. It was the Thompsons and their Elm Street neighbors, the Lantzes, who poured the gasoline around the power plant; and it was the Grays and the Lanes who set the fuel afire. Never again would their children—Nancy, Glen, Tina, Rod, and all the others—be terrorized by the wicked Fred Krueger. They smiled grimly as the power plant began to burn, and someone in the mob applauded when Freddy appeared in the doorway, his red and green sweater burning brightly in the night. Even as the flames consumed his flesh, Freddy could be heard cursing the mob and screaming his vows of revenge. Then, with one last cry of agony, the burning figure turned from the crowd and raced madly into the very flames that were devouring him.

The body was never found.

"I guess we've seen the last of Fred Kreuger," said Marge Thompson that night, breathing a deep sigh of relief as she examined Freddy's blood-caked finger-knives with a mixture of disgust and ill-concealed fascination.

But Marge was wrong.

Freddy would be back.

And the nightmare was just about to begin.